



- 3.0 Those who Set the Stage
- 3.2 Republicans and those who would resort to physical force
- 3.2.4 Eoin MacNeill and the Irish Volunteers

MacNeill contributed directly to the Rising by establishing, arming and training the Irish Volunteers.

Eoin MacNeill (1867-1945) was born of middle-class Catholic parents at Glenarm on the Antrim coast. He was educated at St Malachy's College, Belfast and gained a degree from the Royal University of Ireland. In 1893, together with Douglas Hyde and others he founded the Gaelic League, an organisation devoted to the preservation of the Irish language, literature, and traditional culture. He was the first secretary of the Gaelic League, and edited its influential journal *An Claidheamh Soluis* (the Sword of Light) for a period. A brilliant linguist and historian, MacNeill revolutionised Celtic studies, establishing that the sources did not extend beyond the fifth century and that accounts of earlier periods were based on late fabrications. In 1909, he became professor of early and medieval Irish history at University College, Dublin.

While primarily a scholar and cultural activist, in an article entitled 'The North began' in *An Claidheamh Soluis* (1 November 1913), McNeill advocated the formation of a national volunteer force on the lines of the Ulster Volunteer Force. The organisation was established in Dublin on 25 November, its ostensible purpose being to safeguard Home Rule; a number of the executive, however, were members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood who aimed at using the Volunteers to gain full independence,

3.2.4 Eoin MacNeill and the Irish Volunteers

which indeed came to pass, most of the participants in the 1916 Rising being members of the Volunteers. MacNeill, also a separatist but moderate in tone and well regarded publicly, was given the role of chief of staff.

Under MacNeill's direction recruitment proceeded apace, the numbers eventually reaching 170,000. He also encouraged the creation of a complementary women's force, Cumann na mBan, in April 1914. As chief of staff, he was involved in planning the importation of the Howth arms. Following the split in September 1914 and the defection of the vast majority of members to Redmond, the remaining Irish Volunteers, numbering about 10,000 and mainly located in Dublin, continued under MacNeill's leadership. Many in this new and trimmed-down force of Irish Volunteers had little regard for Home Rule, the majority being committed republicans.

MacNeill's strategy was to organise an insurrection if there were adequate reasons and when circumstances seemed favourable; in the meantime, the Irish Volunteers should be fully armed, trained, and held in readiness to counter any attempt to disarm the organisation, impose conscription, or abandon Home Rule. Some of the IRB faction in the leadership, however, planned an insurrection for the more immediate future. It organised routine manoeuvres for Easter Sunday 1916 as a cover for an insurrection throughout the country. Learning of this on Easter Thursday, MacNeill confronted Patrick Pearse, one of the IRB ringleaders, telling him that he would not allow 'a half-armed force to be called out'. Later, however, Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh and Seán MacDiarmada allayed his fears, informing him of the imminent landing of a German ship with substantial quantities of arms at Fenit, Co. Kerry. When it transpired on Saturday evening that the ship had sunk and the arms were lost, MacNeill countermanded the order for manoeuvres the following day.

As a result of MacNeill's countermand, the 1916 Rising was almost entirely confined to Dublin; even there, the numbers were only about a quarter of what they might otherwise have been. The countermand probably did not materially affect the outcome: even the entire Irish Volunteers force, as it then was (10,000 men), could not have withstood the military might which would have been deployed against it. In the event, MacNeill's action probably saved many lives. On the other hand, if it were not for the

3.2.4 Eoin MacNeill and the Irish Volunteers

countermand, the British might well have prevented the Rising from taking place, thus ensuring that there was no loss of life; once they believed that the manoeuvres were off the British became complacent and in effect allowed the Rising to go ahead.

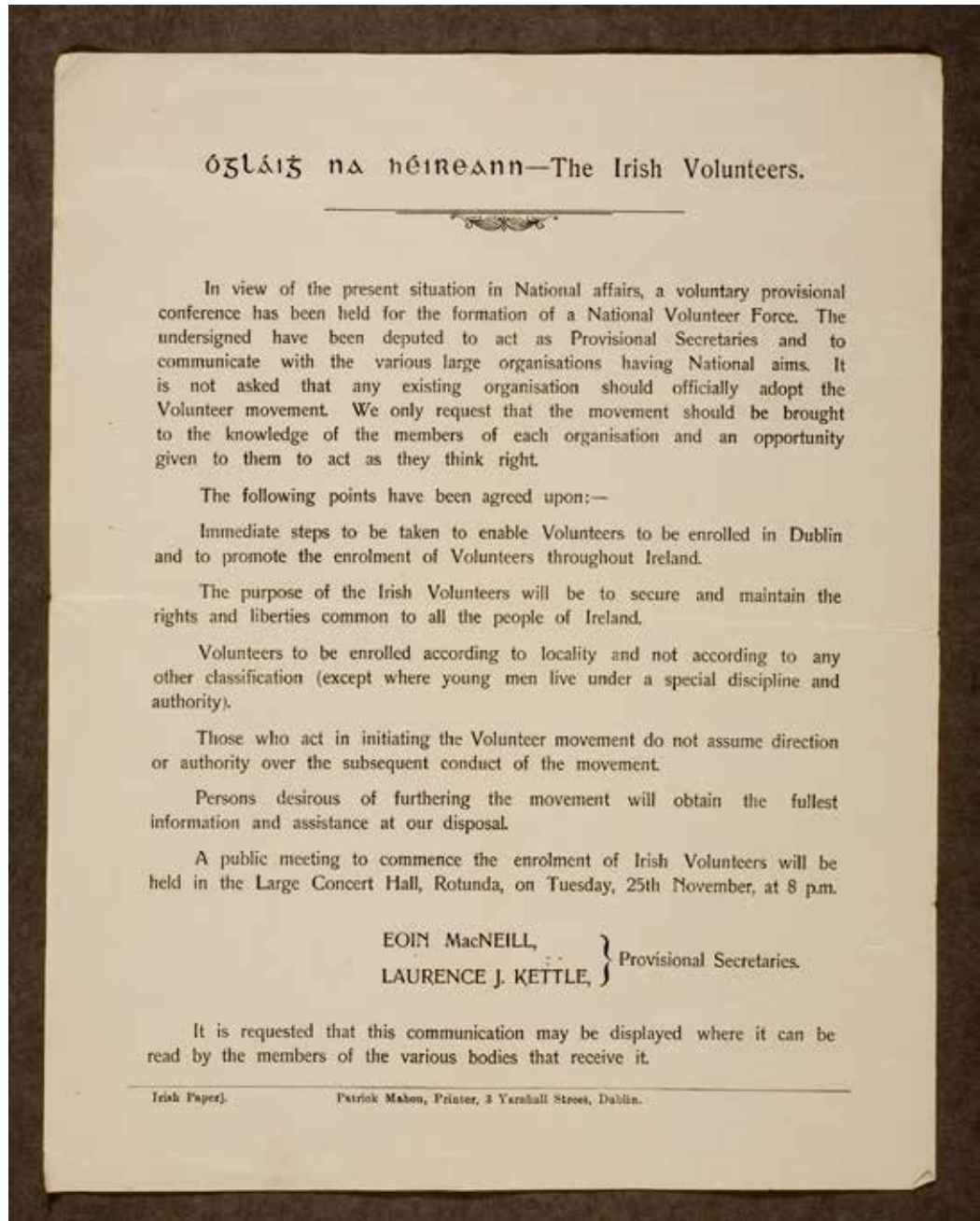
MacNeill took no part in the Rising. Nevertheless, he was tried by court-martial and sentenced to penal servitude for life; he was released under amnesty in June 1917.

3.2.4 Eoin MacNeill and the Irish Volunteers



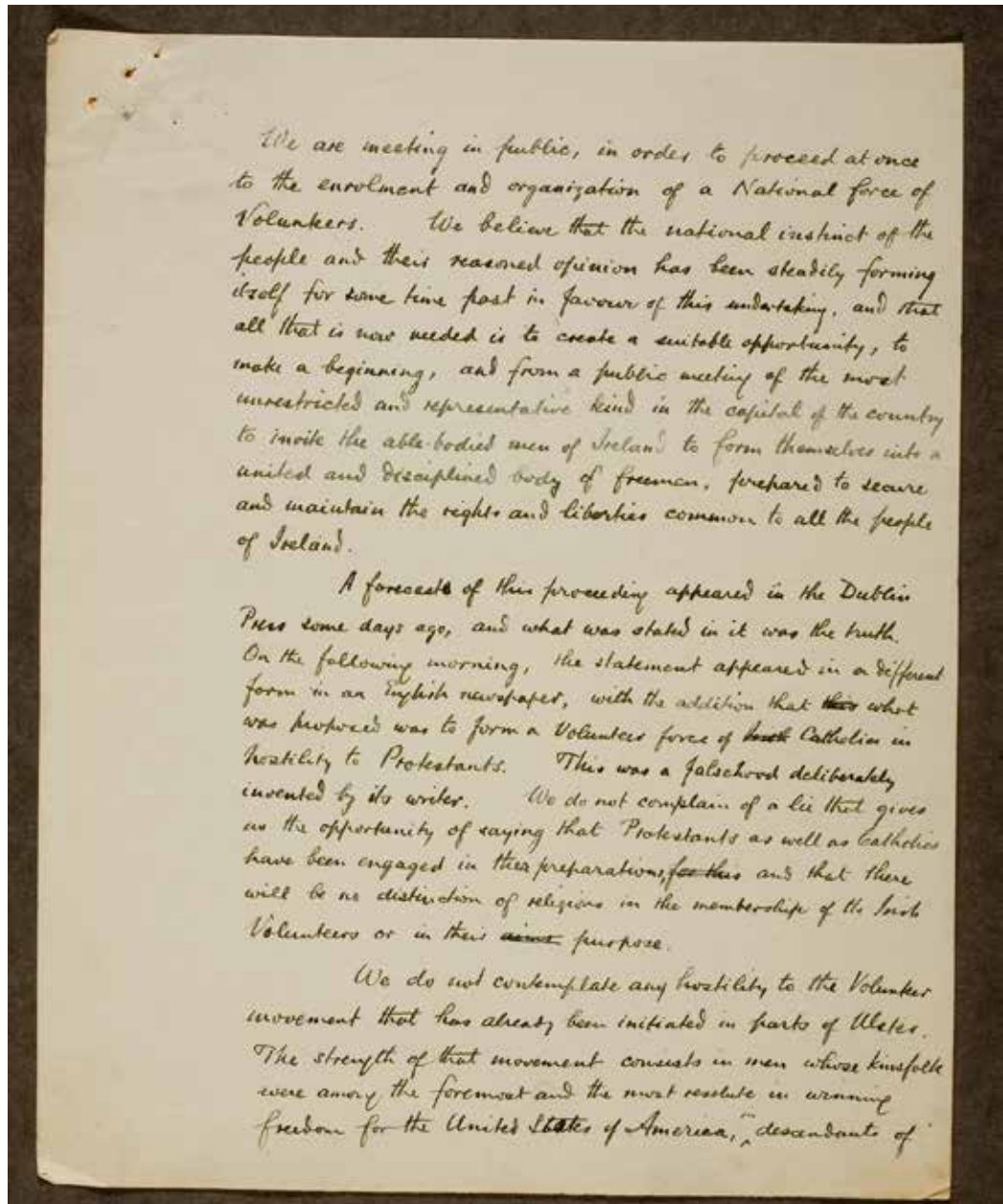
Eoin MacNeill. (Keogh 77)

3.2.4 Eoin MacNeill and the Irish Volunteers



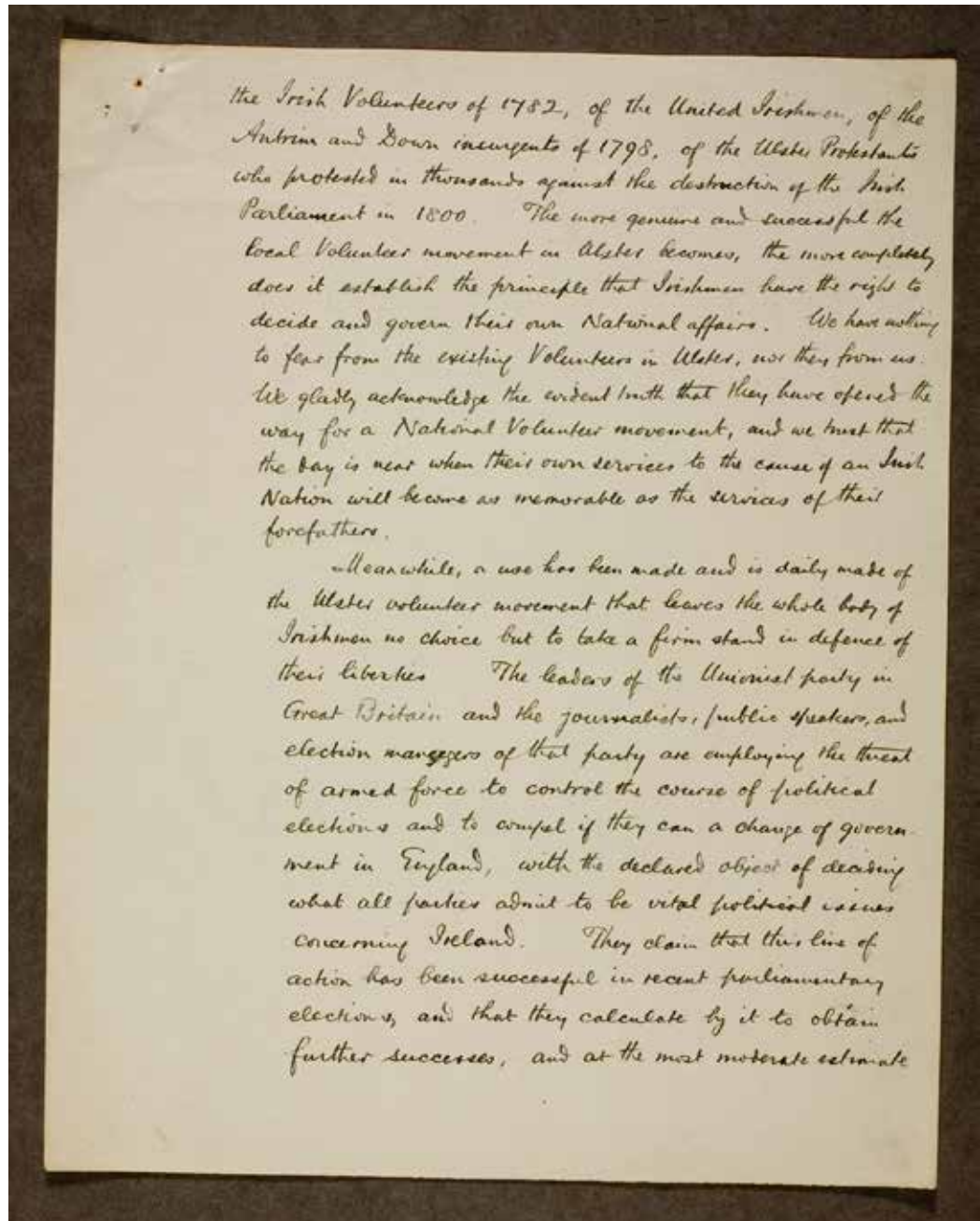
Notice issued by the Irish Volunteers, c.Dec. 1913. (Ms. 8286(2)).

3.2.4 Eoin MacNeill and the Irish Volunteers



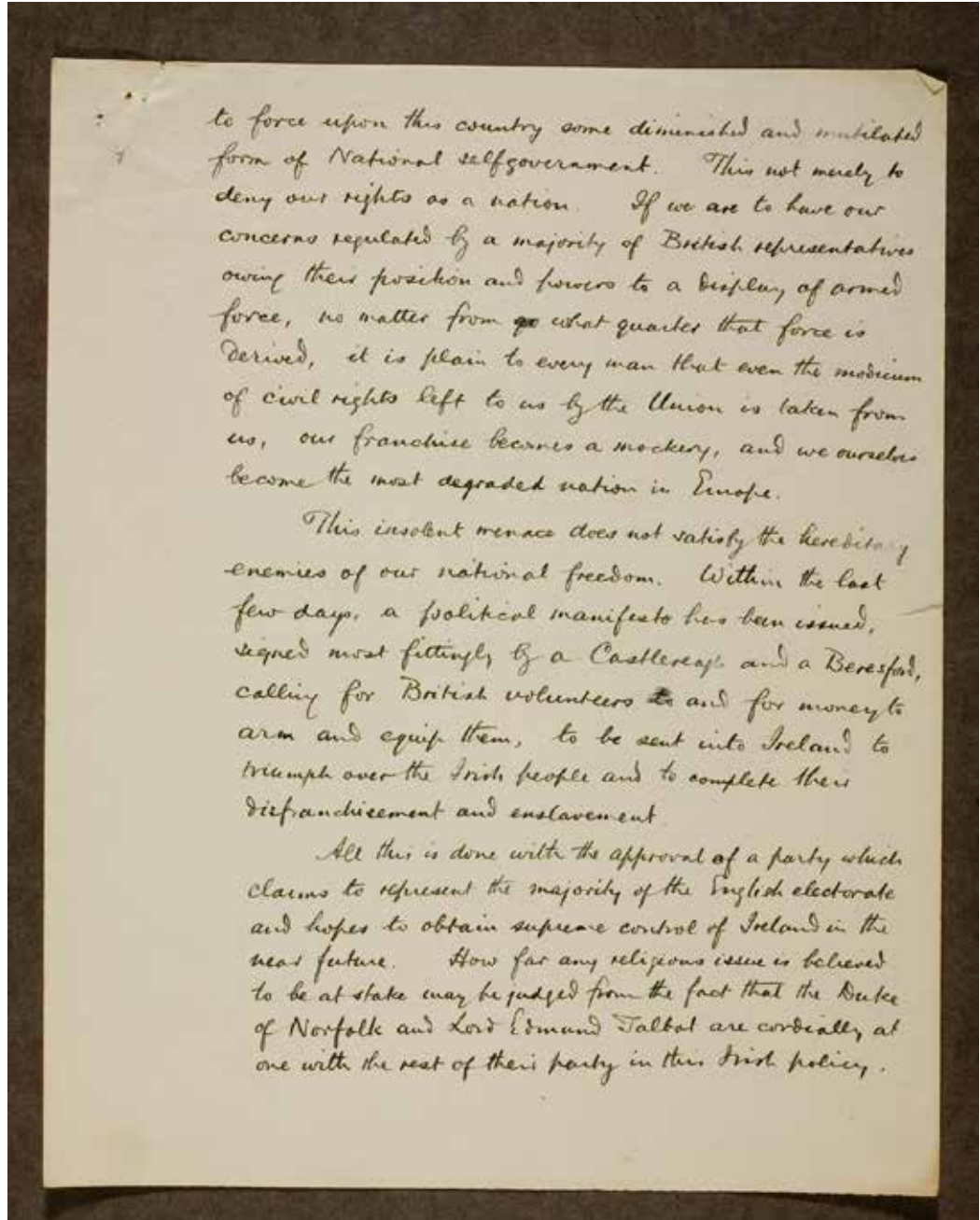
Memorandum by Eoin MacNeill relating to the formation of the Irish Volunteers, Nov. 1913; the text is incomplete. (Ms. 13,174, Hobson Papers).

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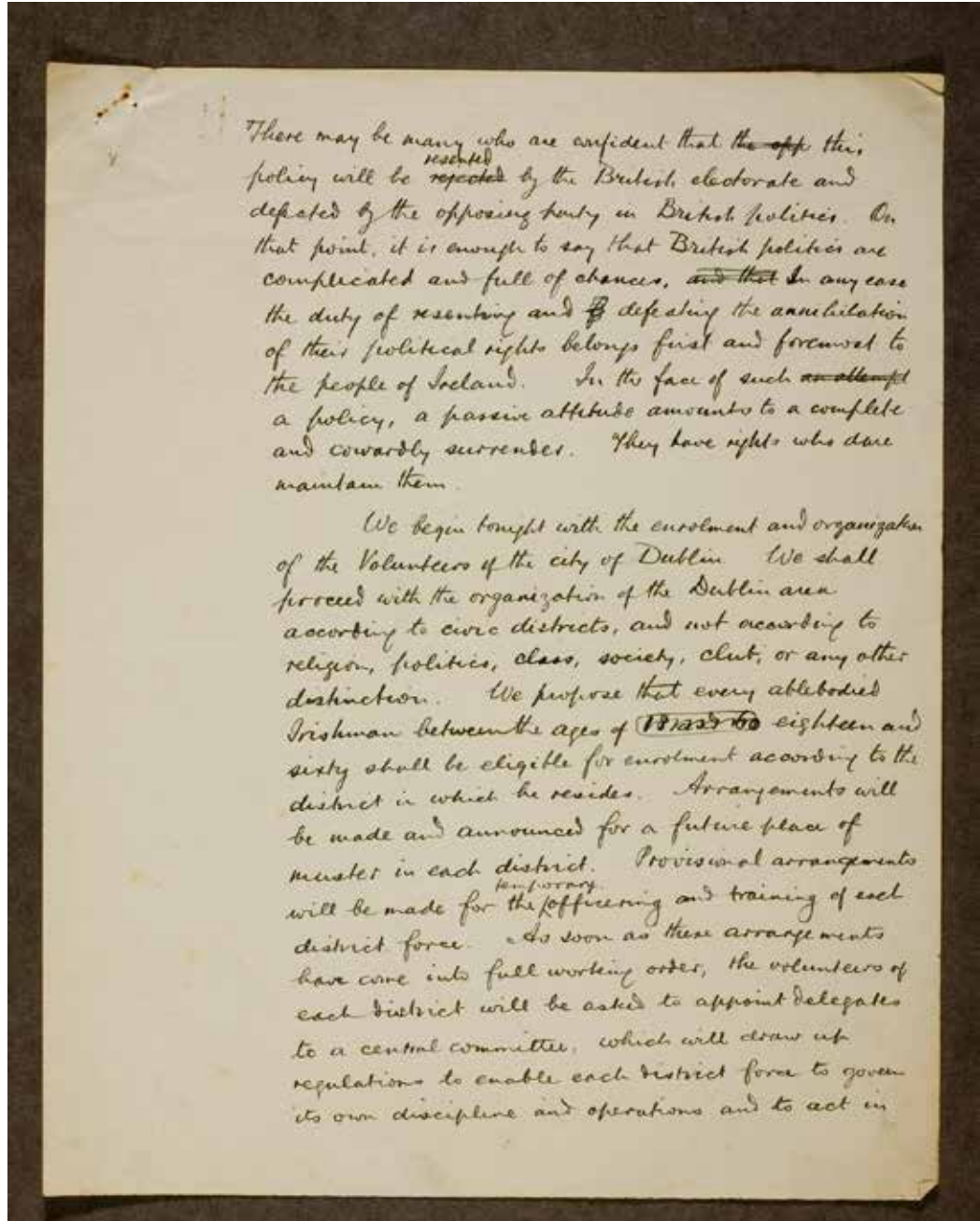
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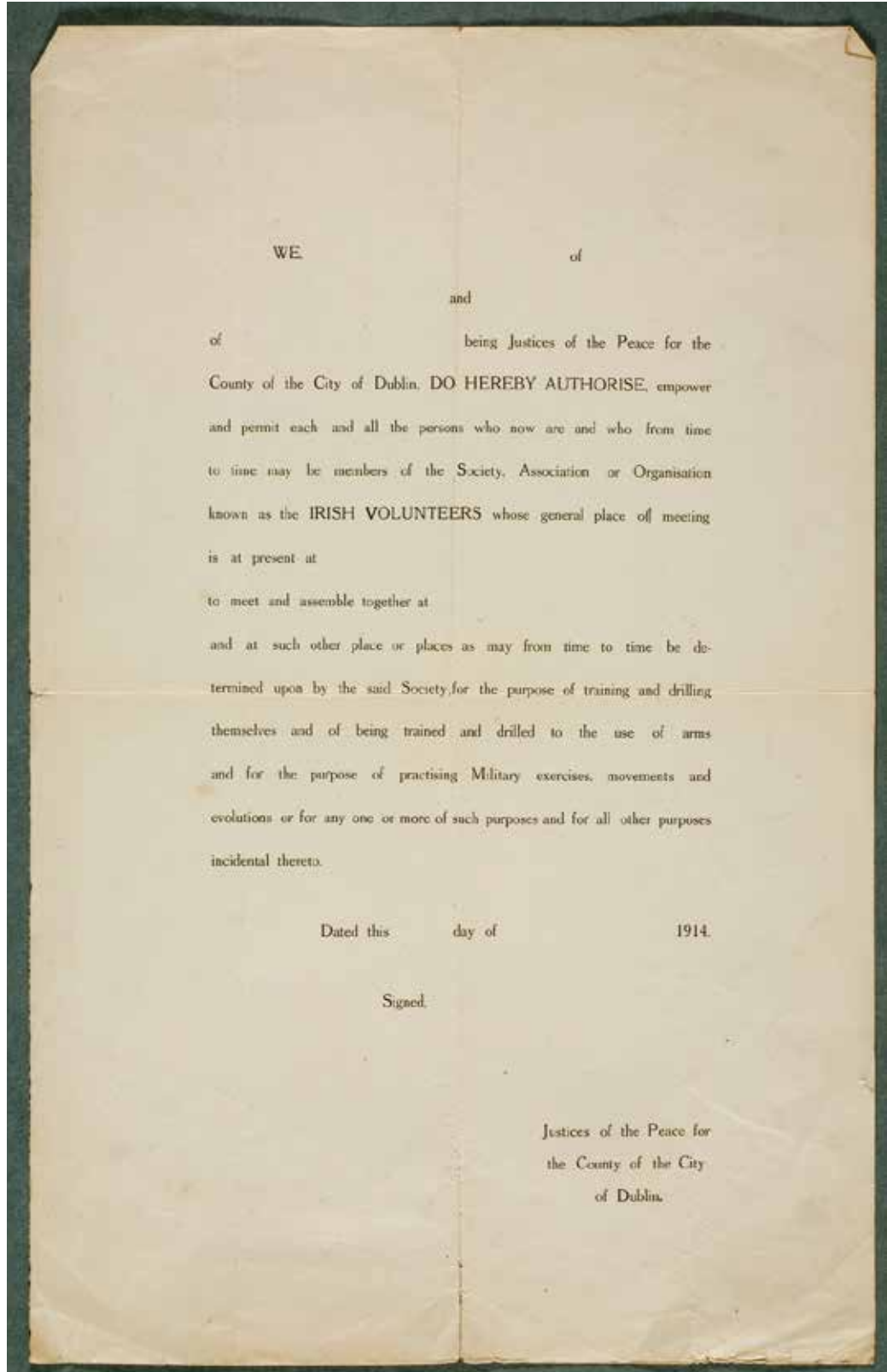
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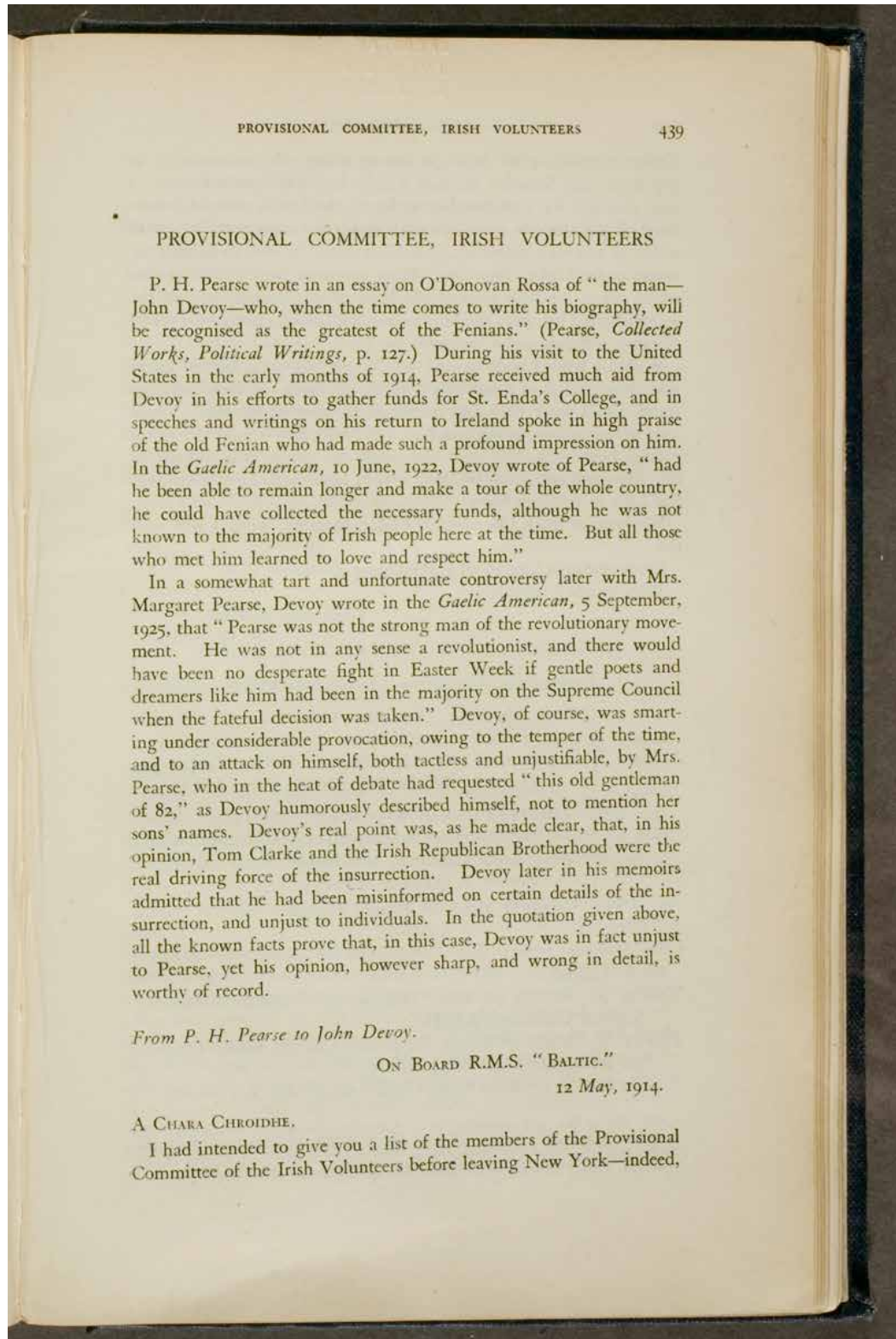
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3.2.4 Eoin MacNeill and the Irish Volunteers



The Irish Volunteers followed the example of the Ulster Volunteers in applying for the permission of magistrates to enable it to carry out drilling. (Proclamations).

3.2.4 Eoin MacNeill and the Irish Volunteers



PROVISIONAL COMMITTEE, IRISH VOLUNTEERS 439

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P. H. Pearse wrote in an essay on O'Donovan Rossa of "the man—John Devoy—who, when the time comes to write his biography, will be recognised as the greatest of the Fenians." (Pearse, *Collected Works, Political Writings*, p. 127.) During his visit to the United States in the early months of 1914, Pearse received much aid from Devoy in his efforts to gather funds for St. Enda's College, and in speeches and writings on his return to Ireland spoke in high praise of the old Fenian who had made such a profound impression on him. In the *Gaelic American*, 10 June, 1922, Devoy wrote of Pearse, "had he been able to remain longer and make a tour of the whole country, he could have collected the necessary funds, although he was not known to the majority of Irish people here at the time. But all those who met him learned to love and respect him."

In a somewhat tart and unfortunate controversy later with Mrs. Margaret Pearse, Devoy wrote in the *Gaelic American*, 5 September, 1925, that "Pearse was not the strong man of the revolutionary movement. He was not in any sense a revolutionist, and there would have been no desperate fight in Easter Week if gentle poets and dreamers like him had been in the majority on the Supreme Council when the fateful decision was taken." Devoy, of course, was smarting under considerable provocation, owing to the temper of the time, and to an attack on himself, both tactless and unjustifiable, by Mrs. Pearse, who in the heat of debate had requested "this old gentleman of 82," as Devoy humorously described himself, not to mention her sons' names. Devoy's real point was, as he made clear, that, in his opinion, Tom Clarke and the Irish Republican Brotherhood were the real driving force of the insurrection. Devoy later in his memoirs admitted that he had been misinformed on certain details of the insurrection, and unjust to individuals. In the quotation given above, all the known facts prove that, in this case, Devoy was in fact unjust to Pearse, yet his opinion, however sharp, and wrong in detail, is worthy of record.

From P. H. Pearse to John Devoy.

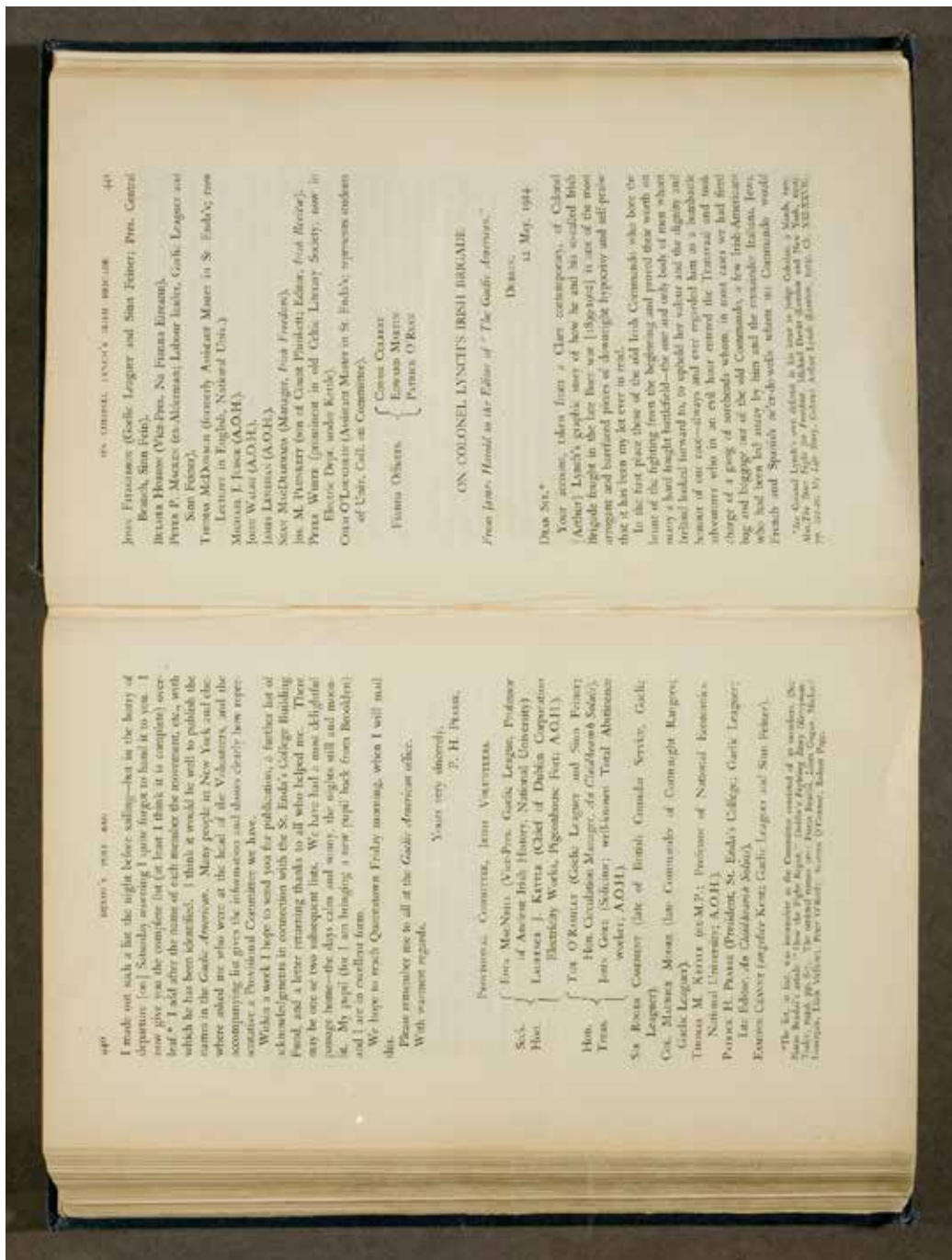
ON BOARD R.M.S. "BALTIC."
 12 May, 1914.

A CHARA CHROIDHE.

I had intended to give you a list of the members of the Provisional Committee of the Irish Volunteers before leaving New York—indeed,

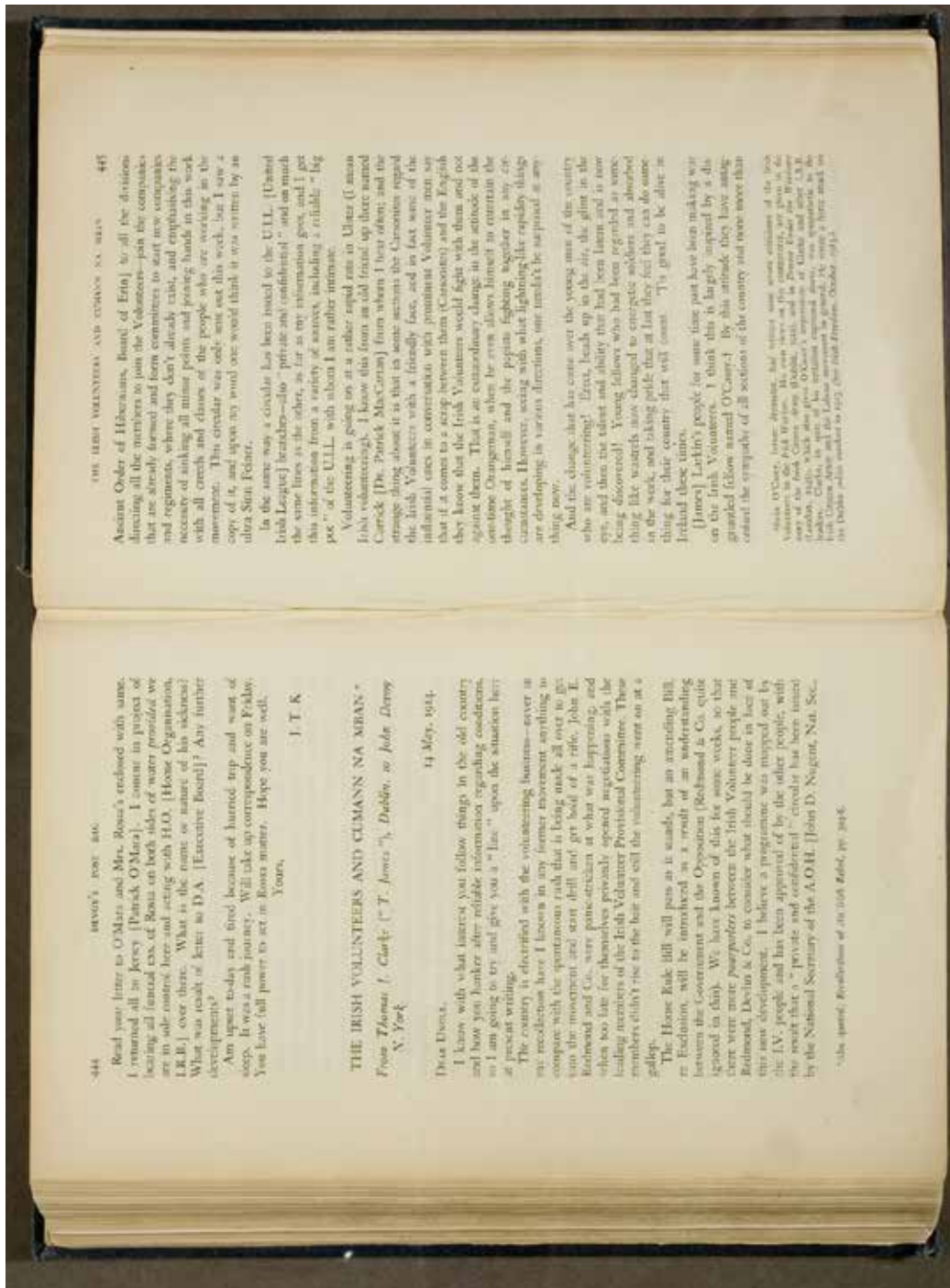
Letter from Patrick Pearse to John Devoy listing the members of the provisional committee of the Irish Volunteers; it includes the names of five of the eventual signatories of the Proclamation, 12 May 1914. (Devoy's Post Bag, 1948).

3.2.4 Eoin MacNeill and the Irish Volunteers



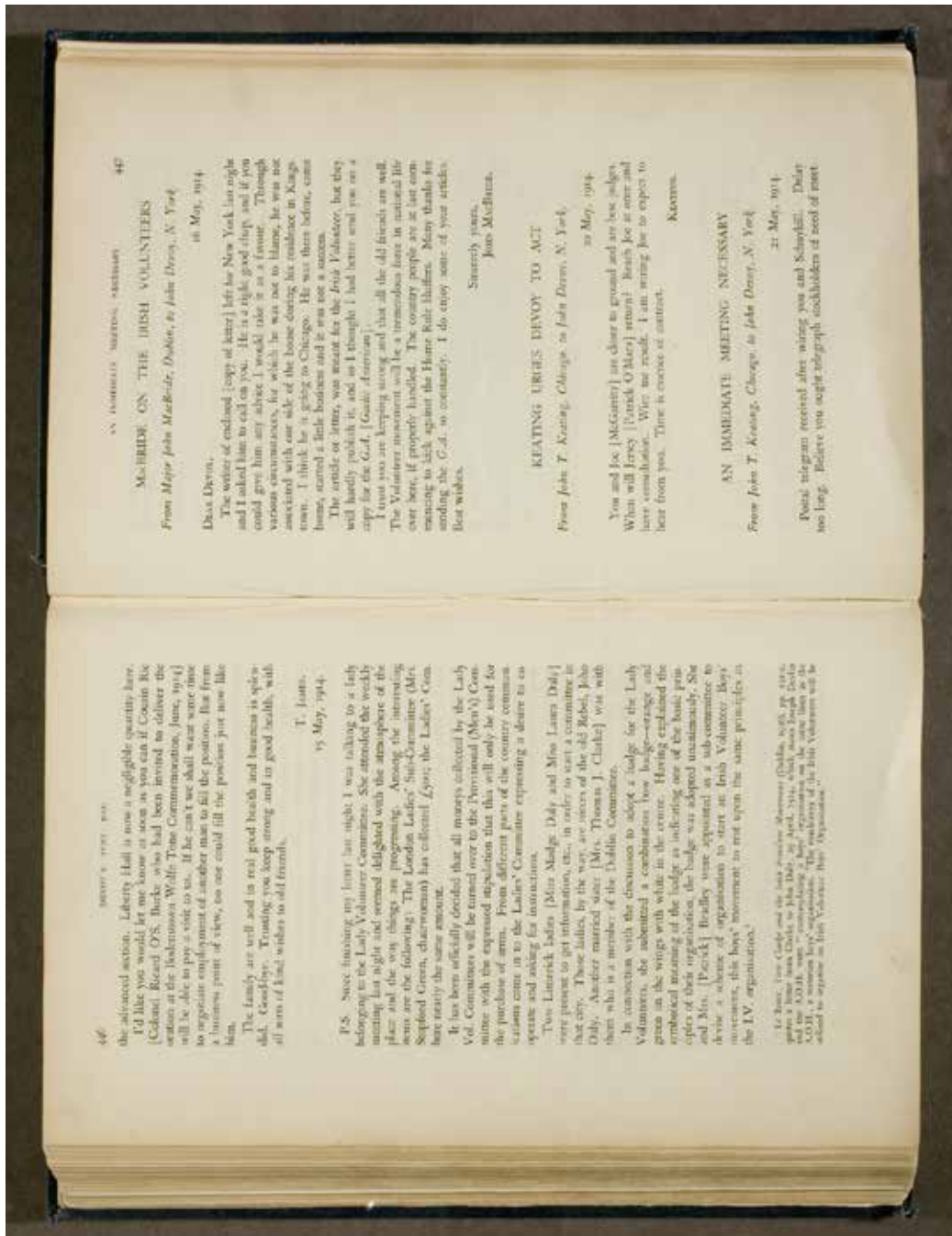
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Letter from Tom Clarke to John Devoy relating to the Irish Volunteers and to Cumann na mBan, 14 May 1914. (Devoy's Post Bag, 1948).

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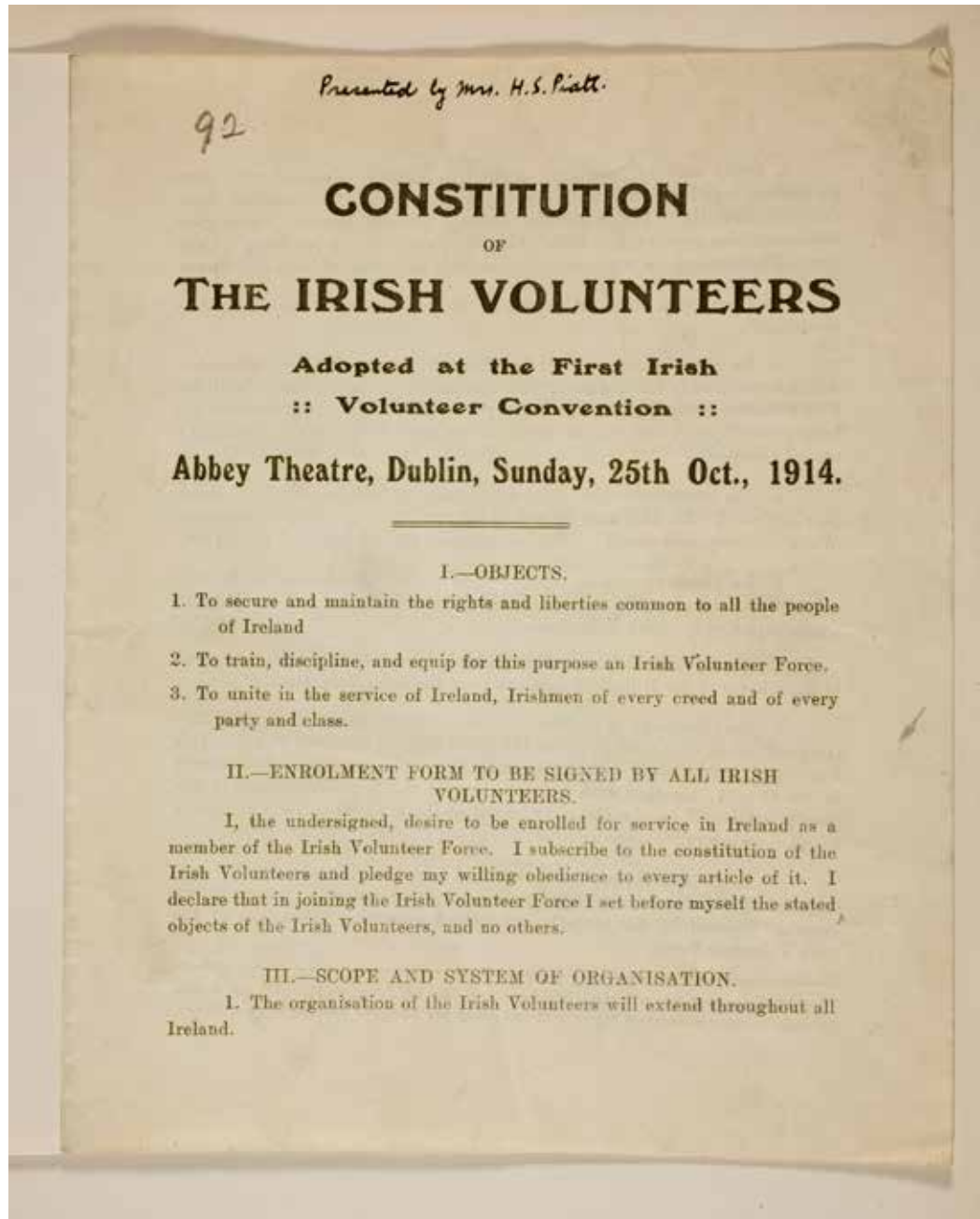
Photographs relating to the importation of arms by the Irish Volunteers at Howth, Co. Dublin, 26 July 1914. The police and military failed to seize the arms. That evening troops opened fire on a hostile crowd on Bachelor's Walk near the centre of Dublin, killing four people and wounding thirty. (Ms. 13,174(7), Hobson Papers).

3.2.4 Eoin MacNeill and the Irish Volunteers



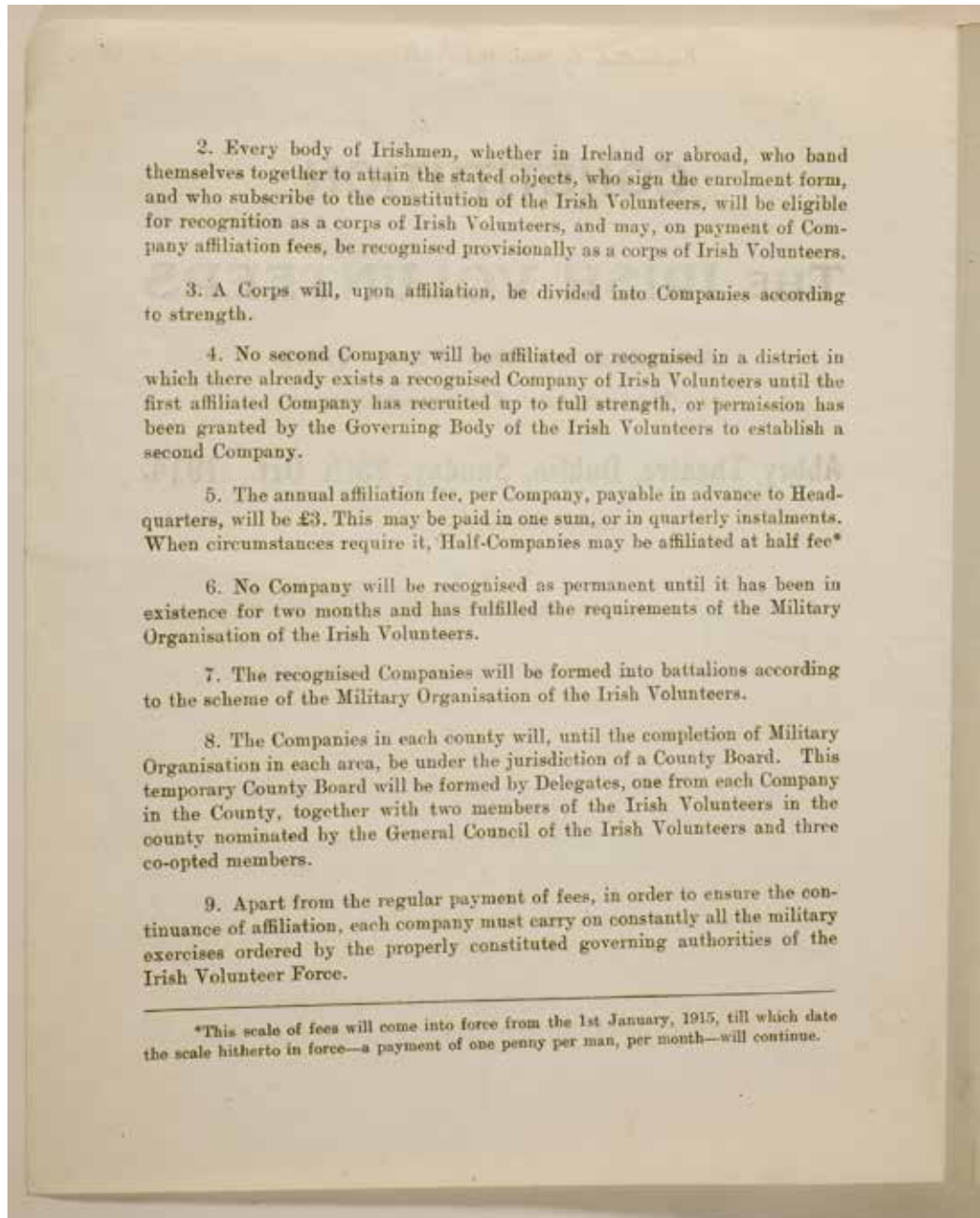
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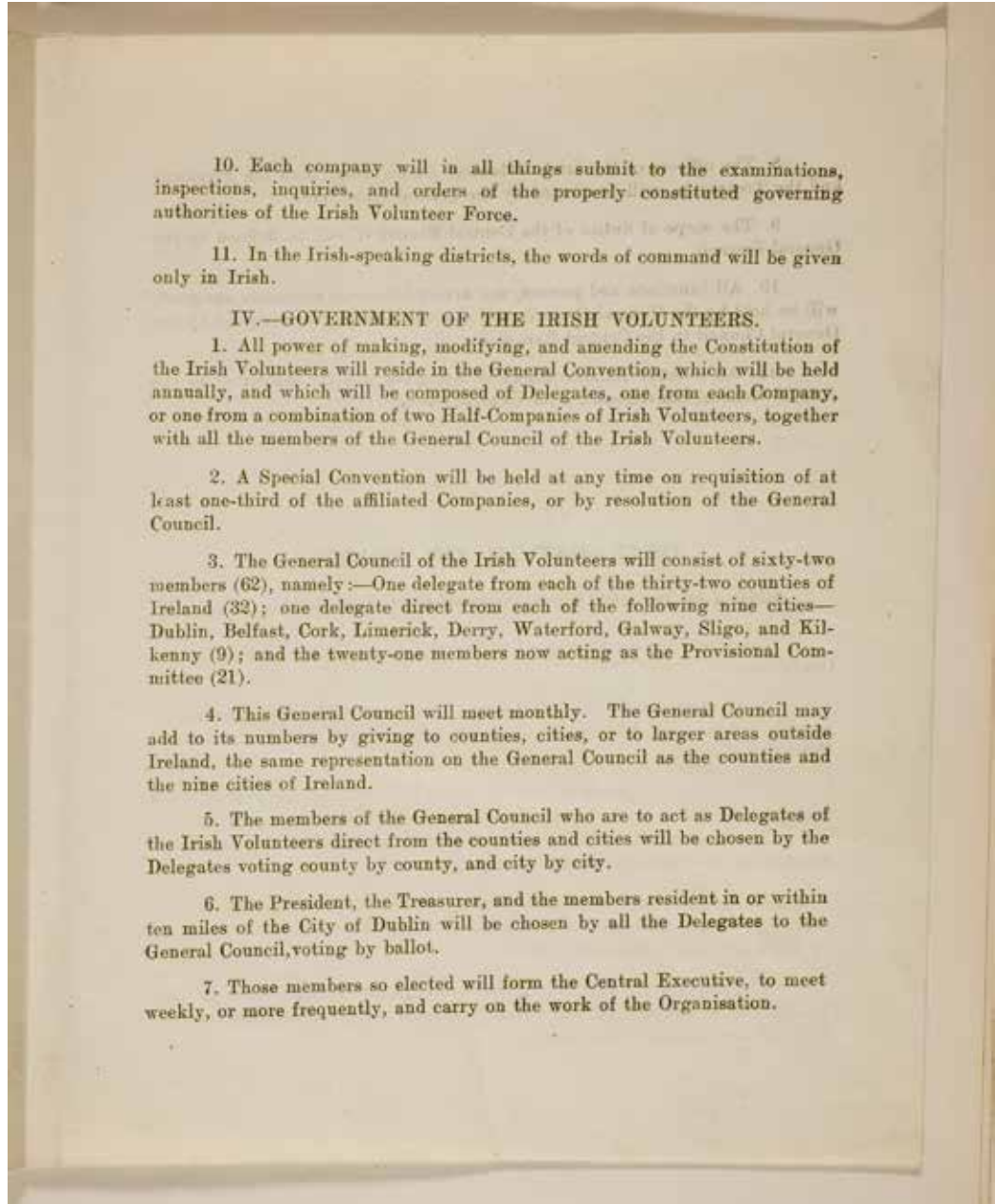
Constitution of the Irish Volunteers.

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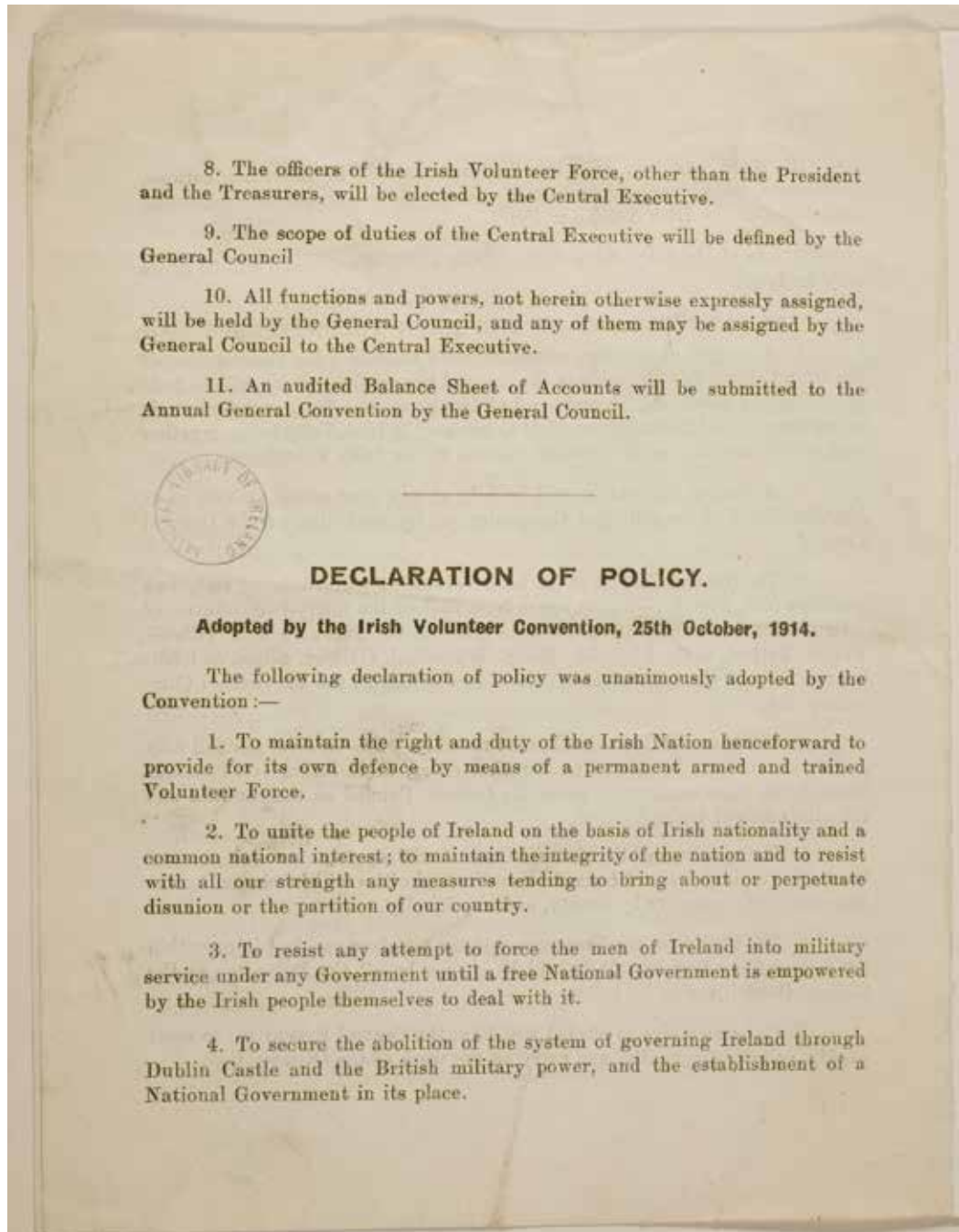
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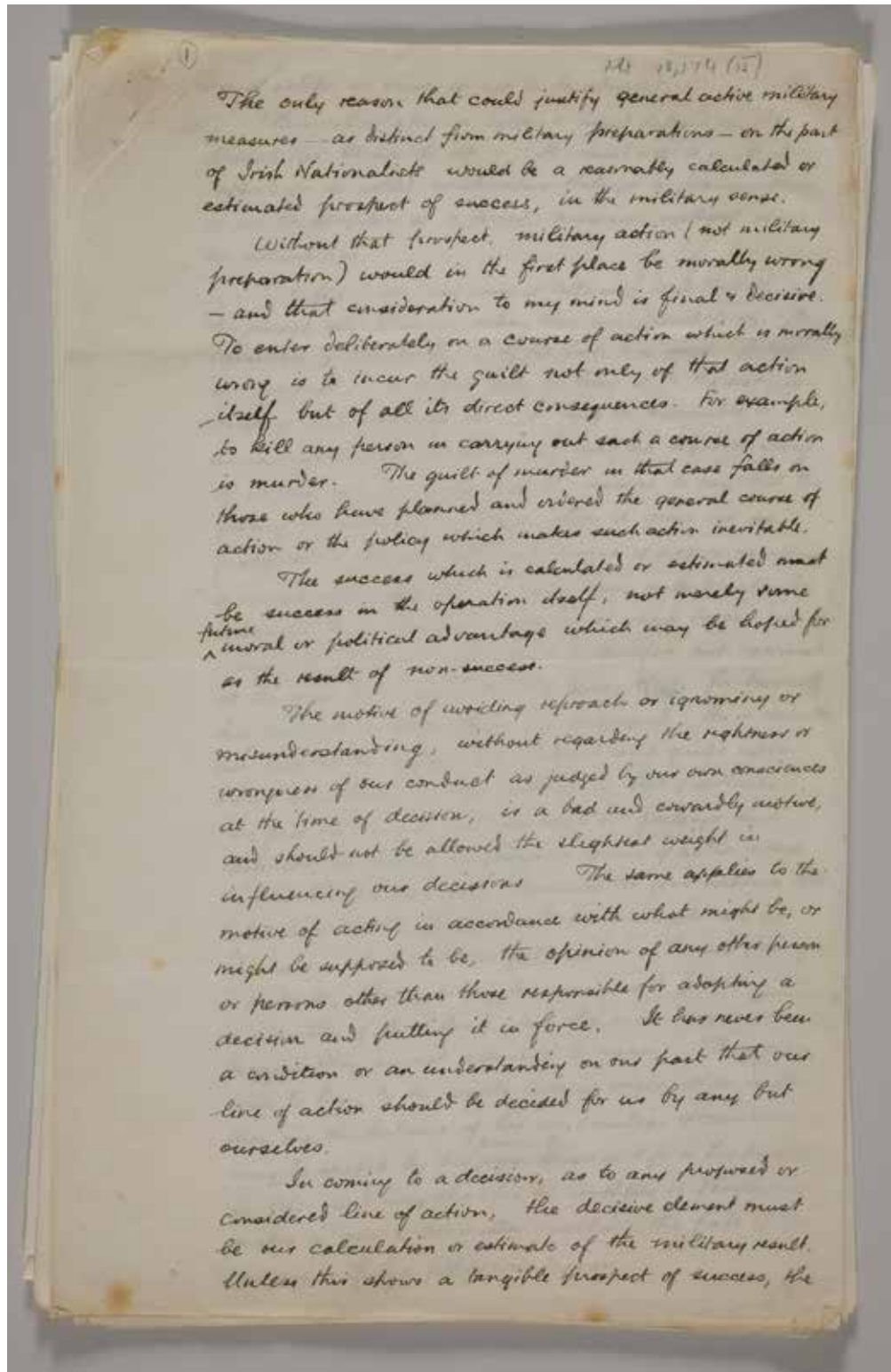
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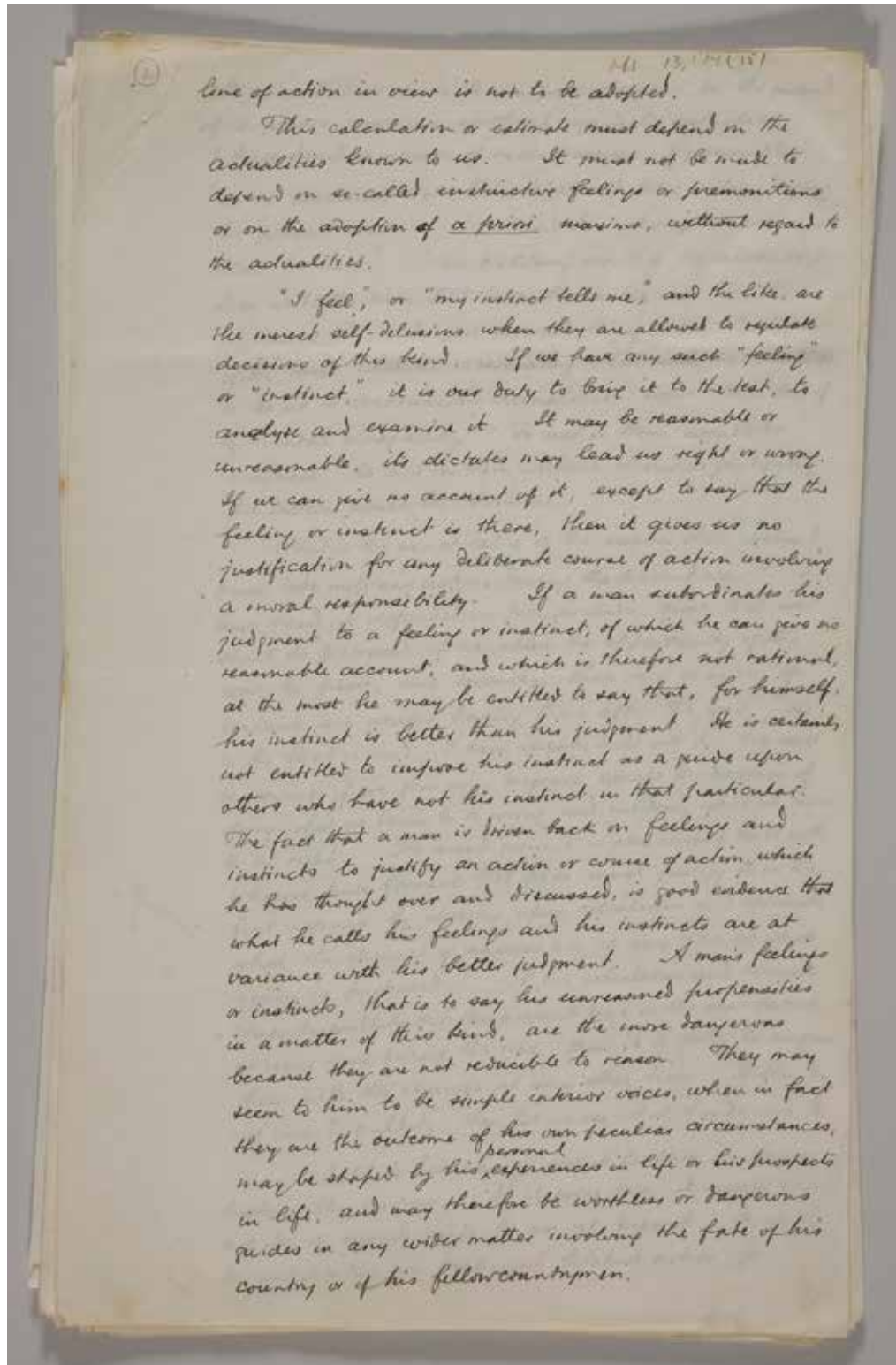
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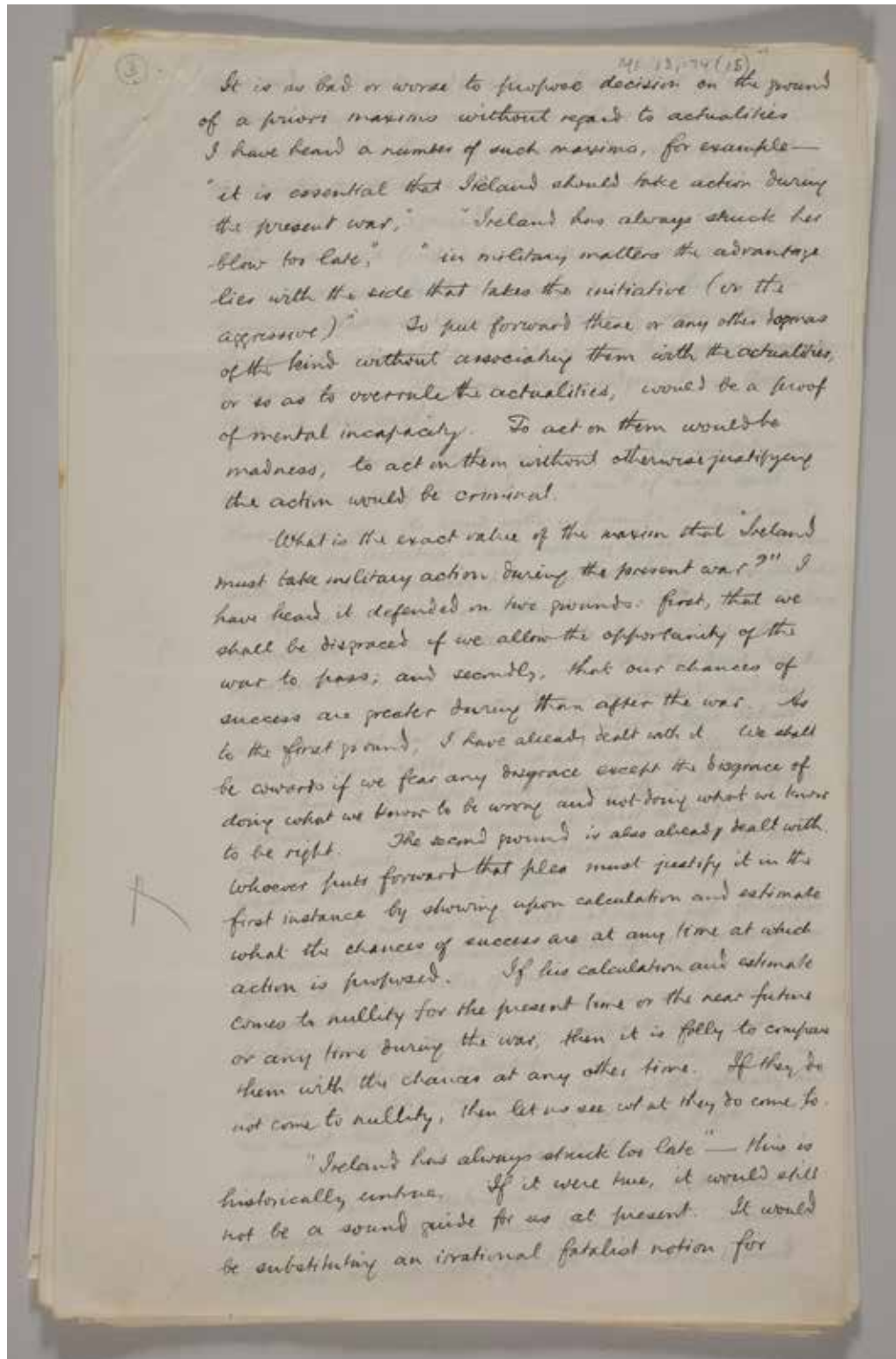
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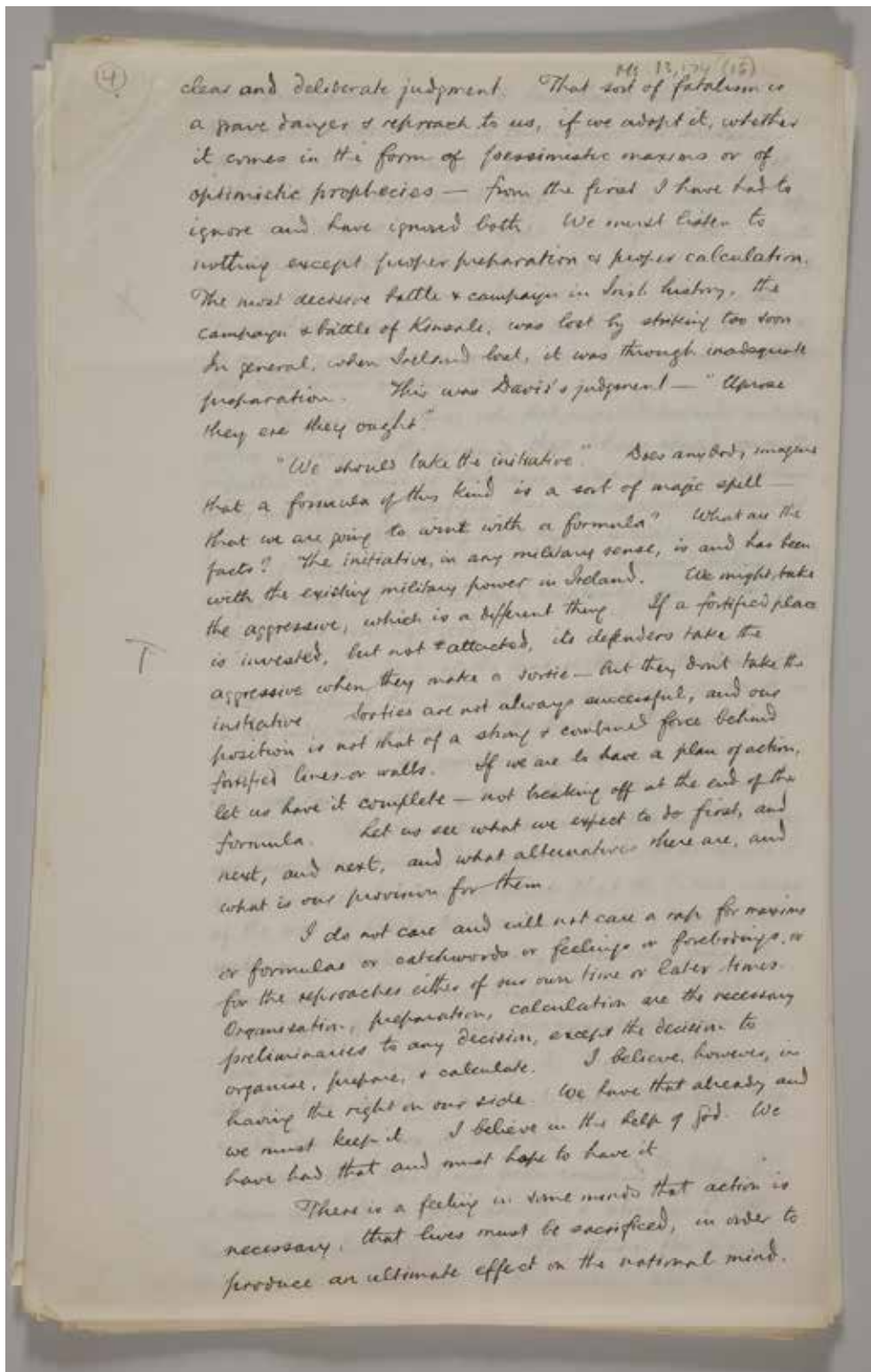
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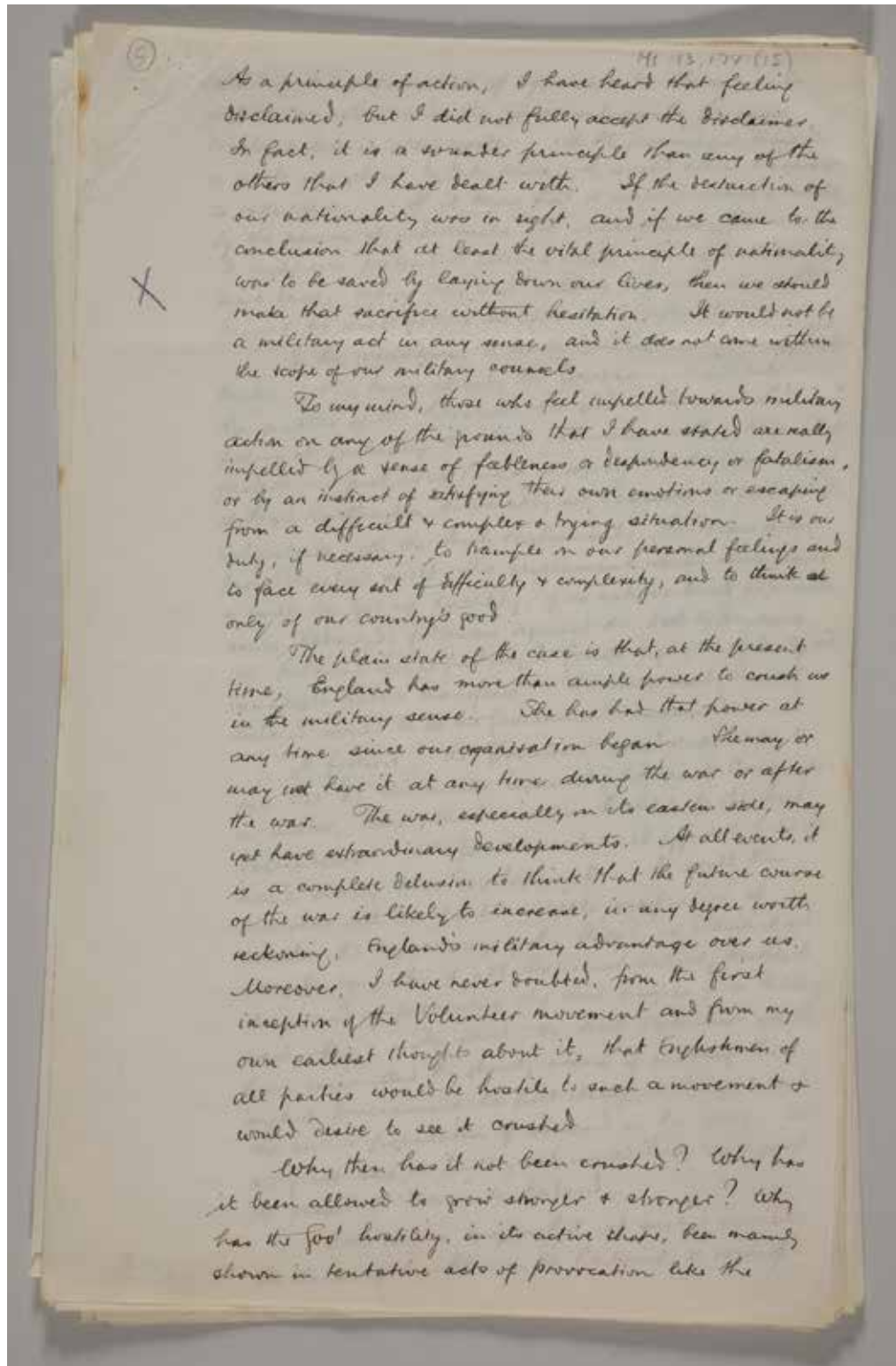
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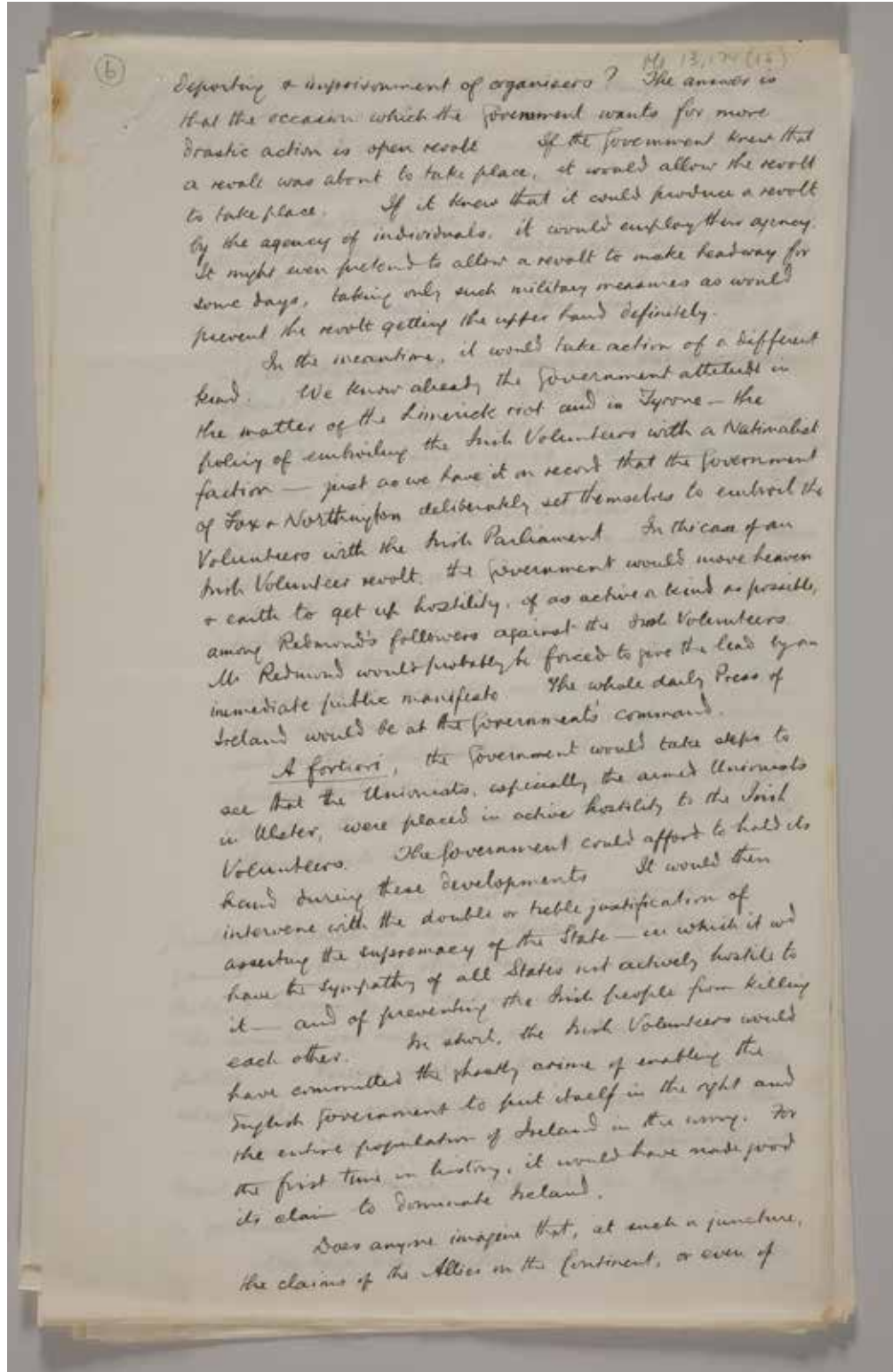
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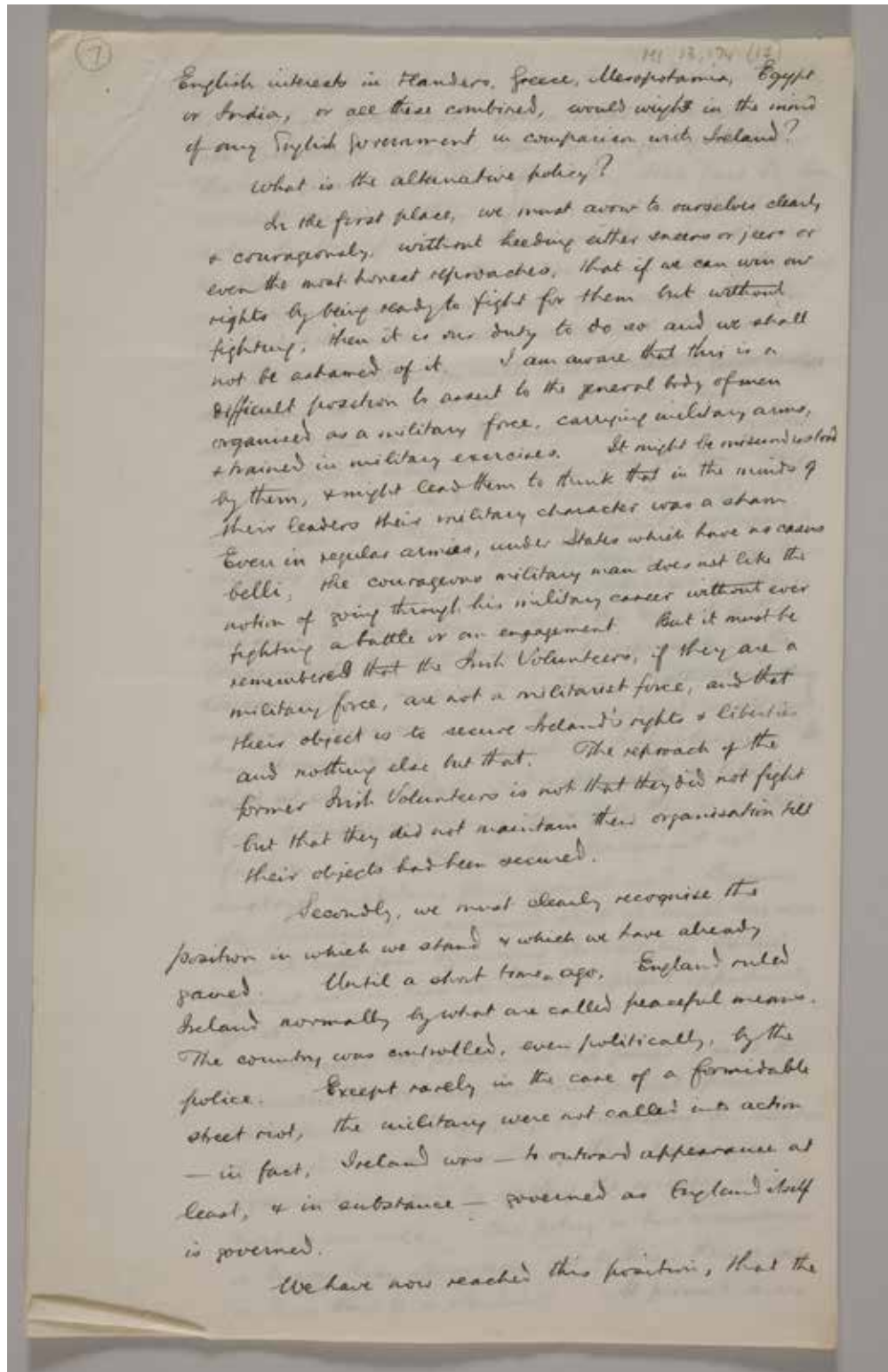
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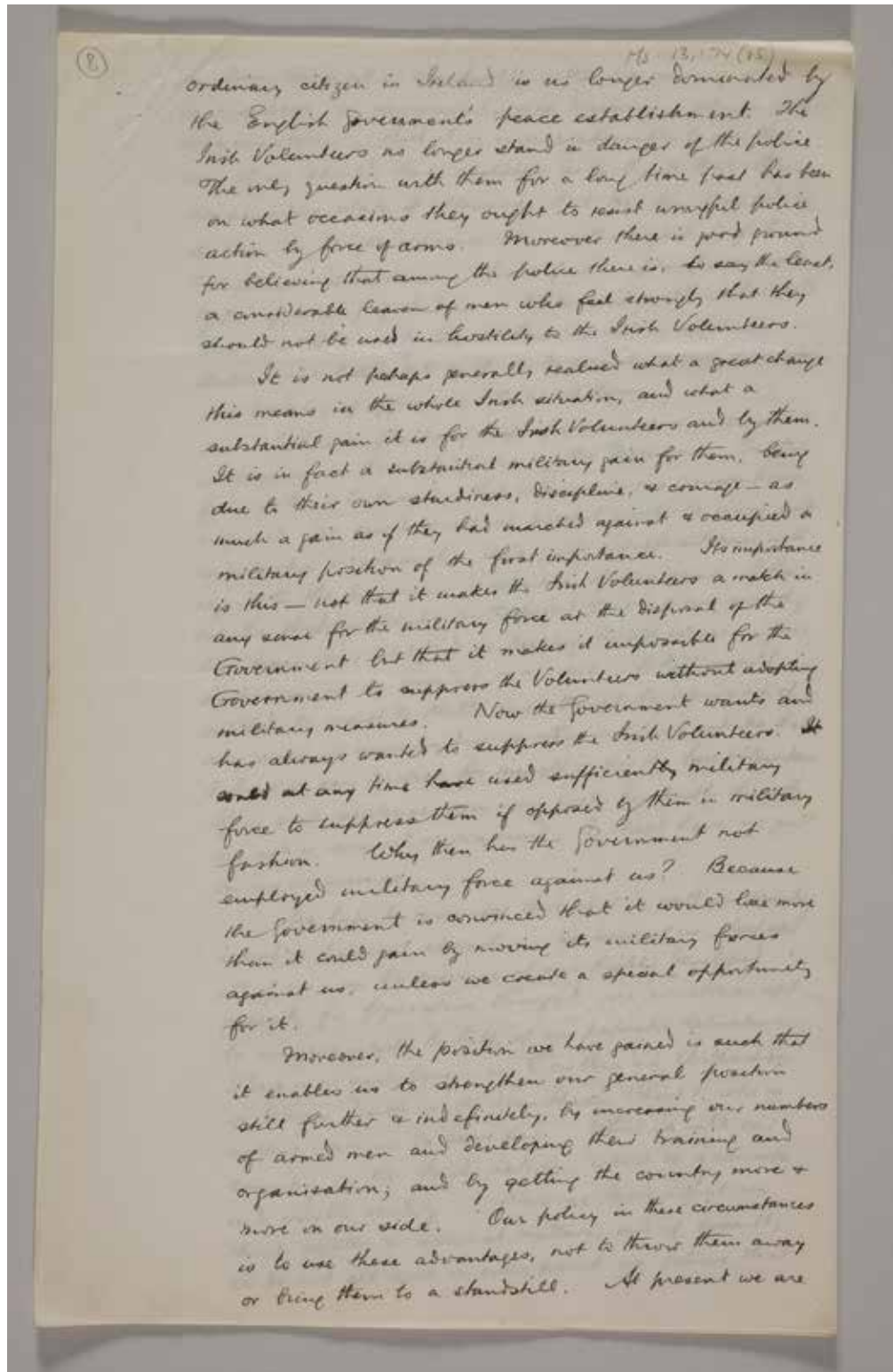
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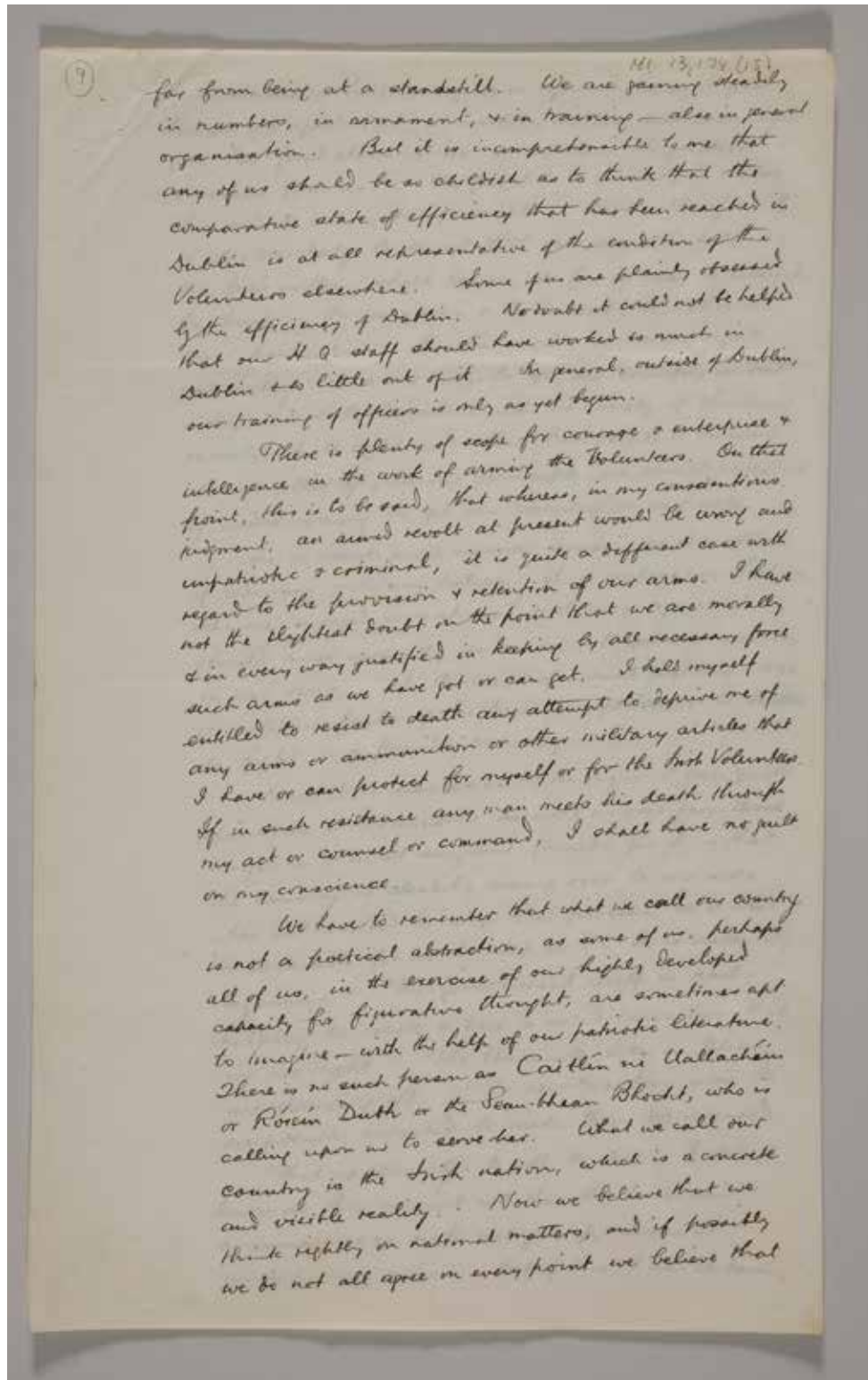
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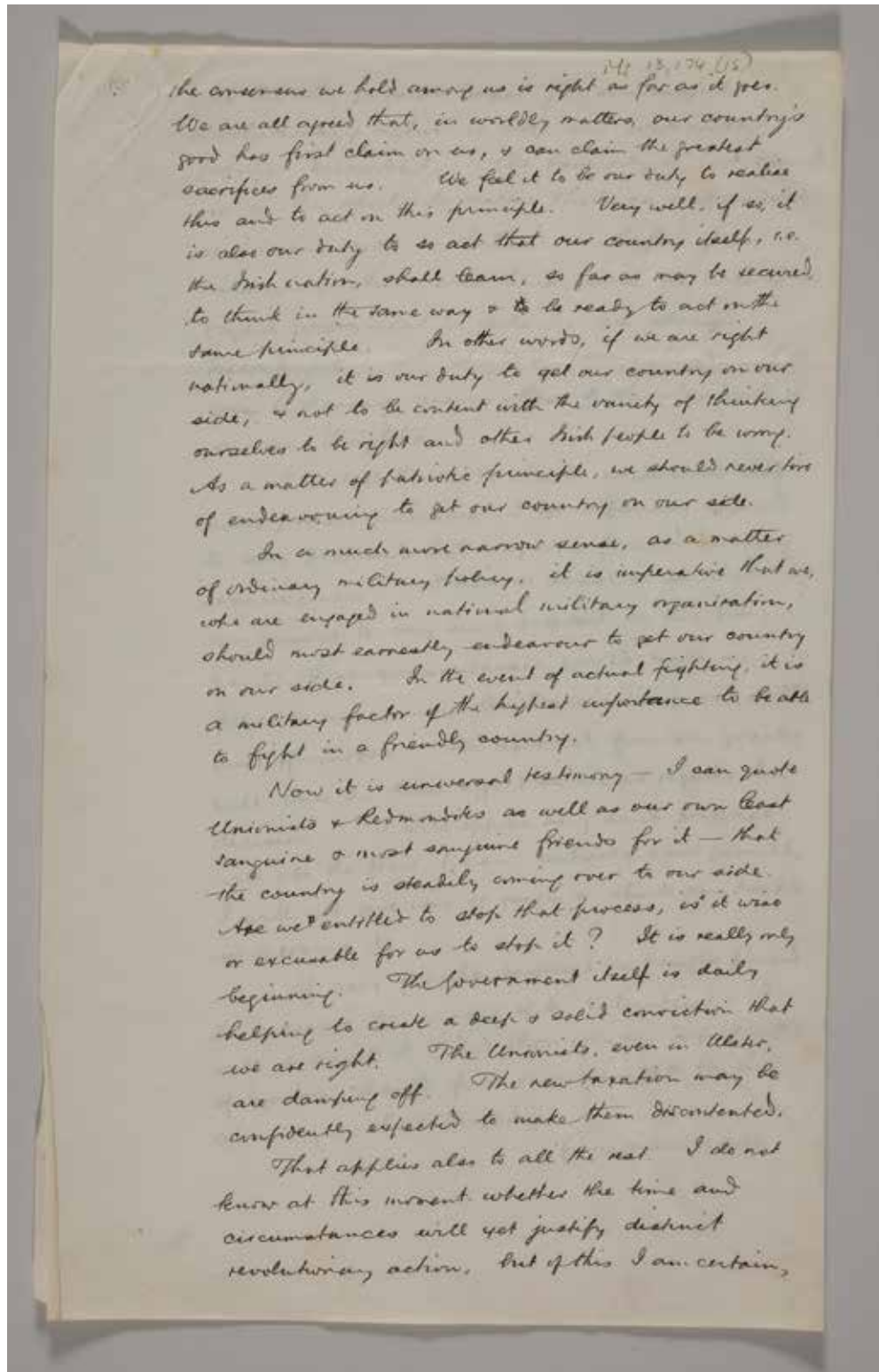
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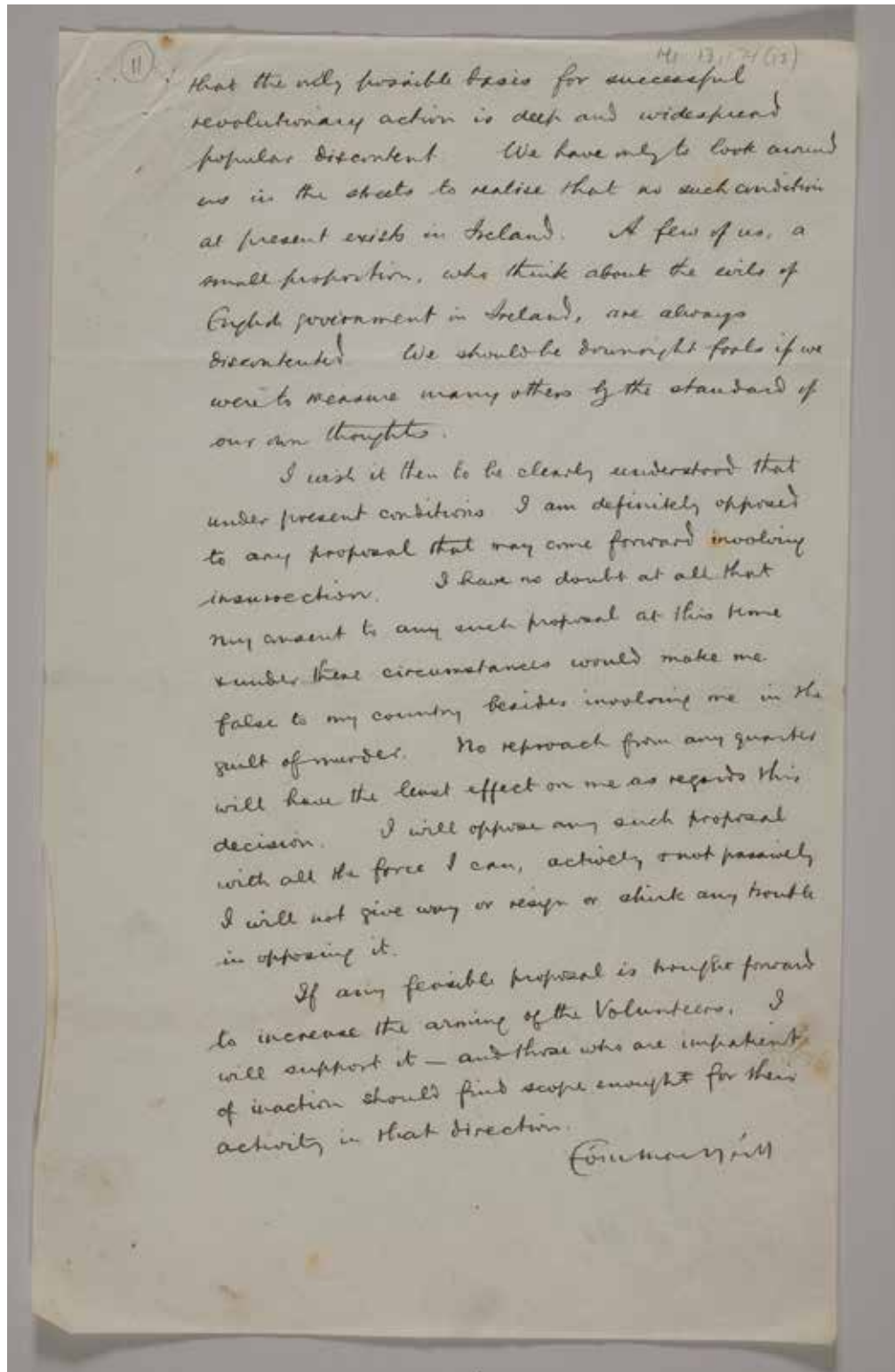
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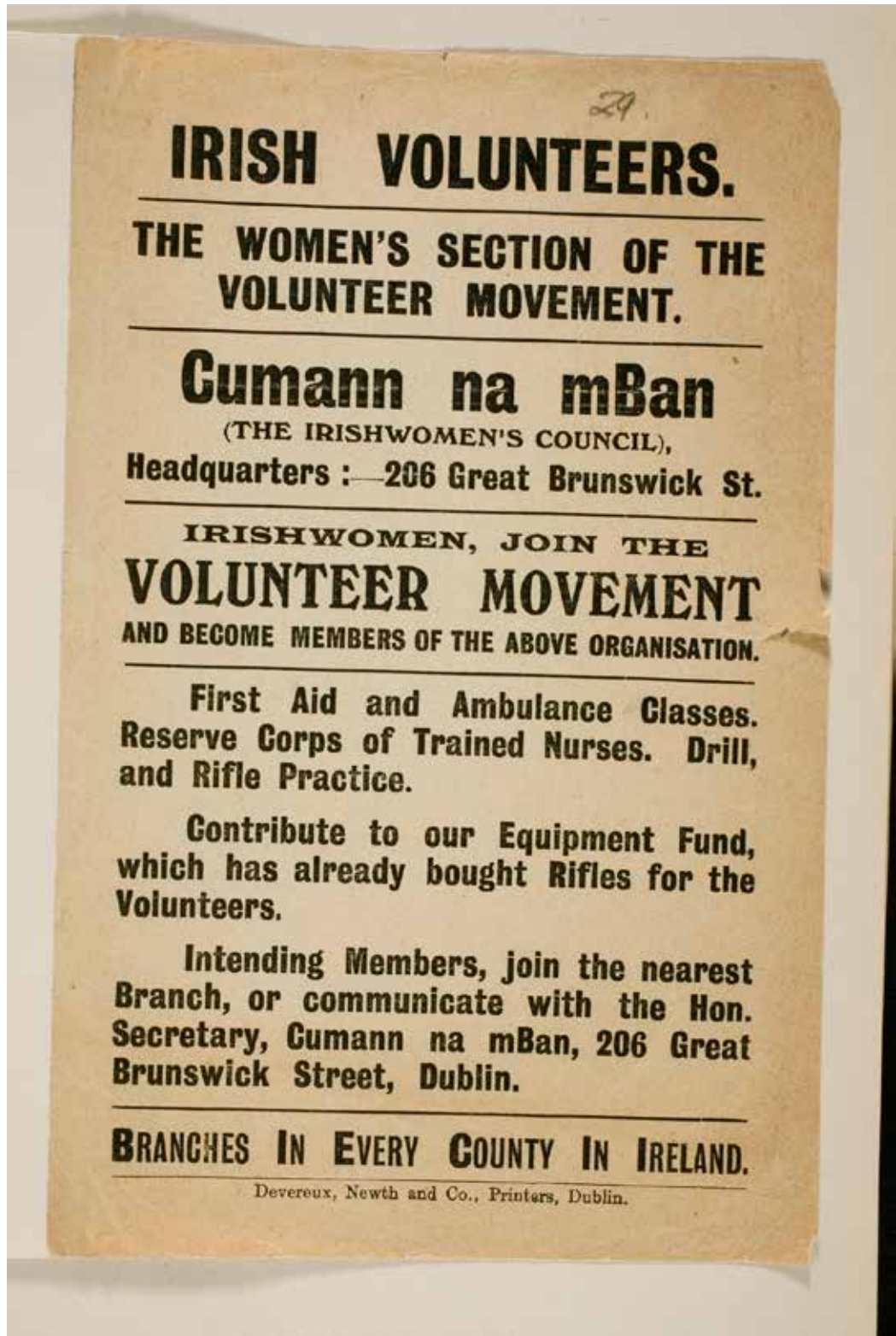
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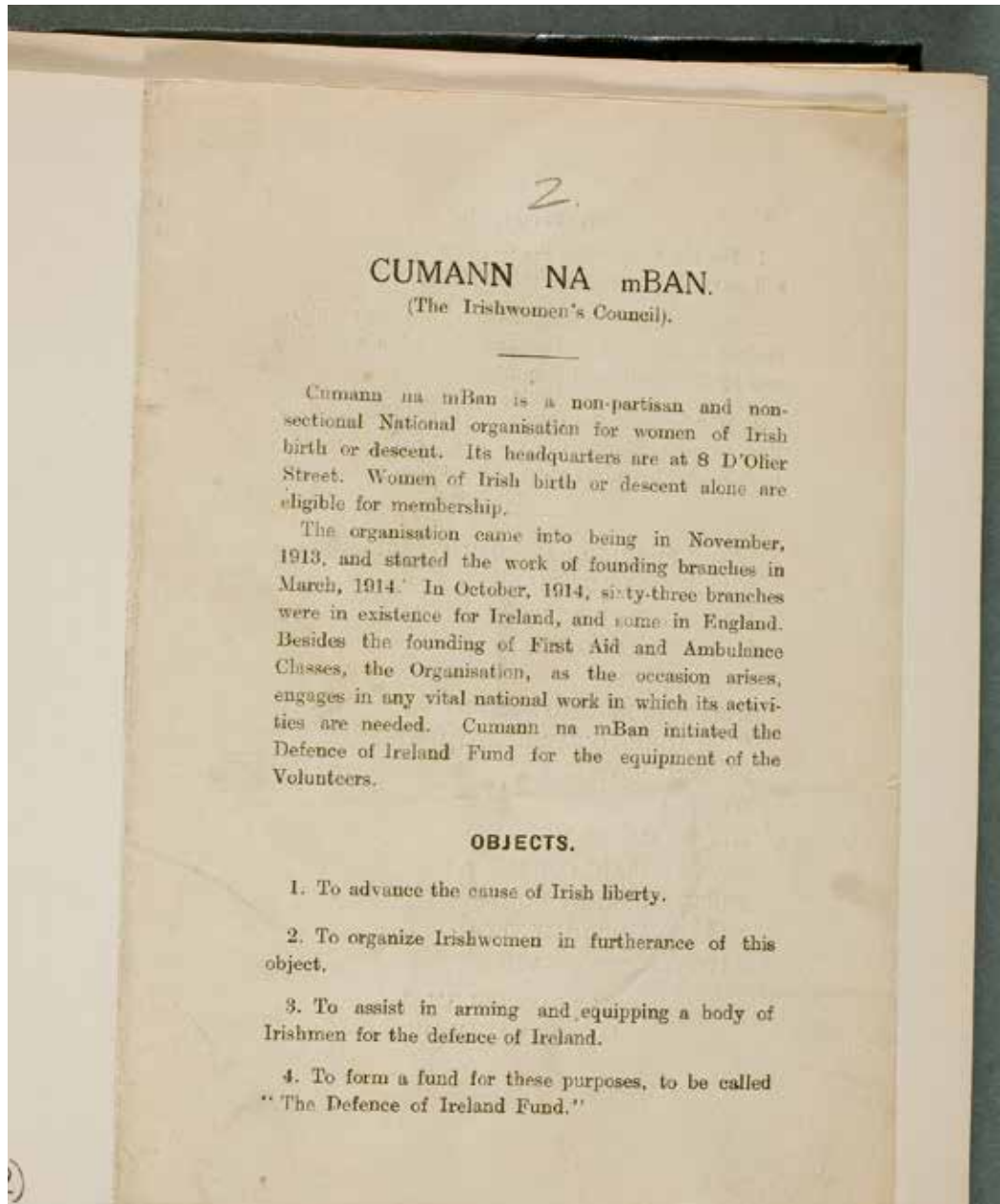
Irish Volunteers parading in Cork City on Saint Patrick's Day, 1916. (Manchester Guardian History of the War, 16 Aug. 1916).

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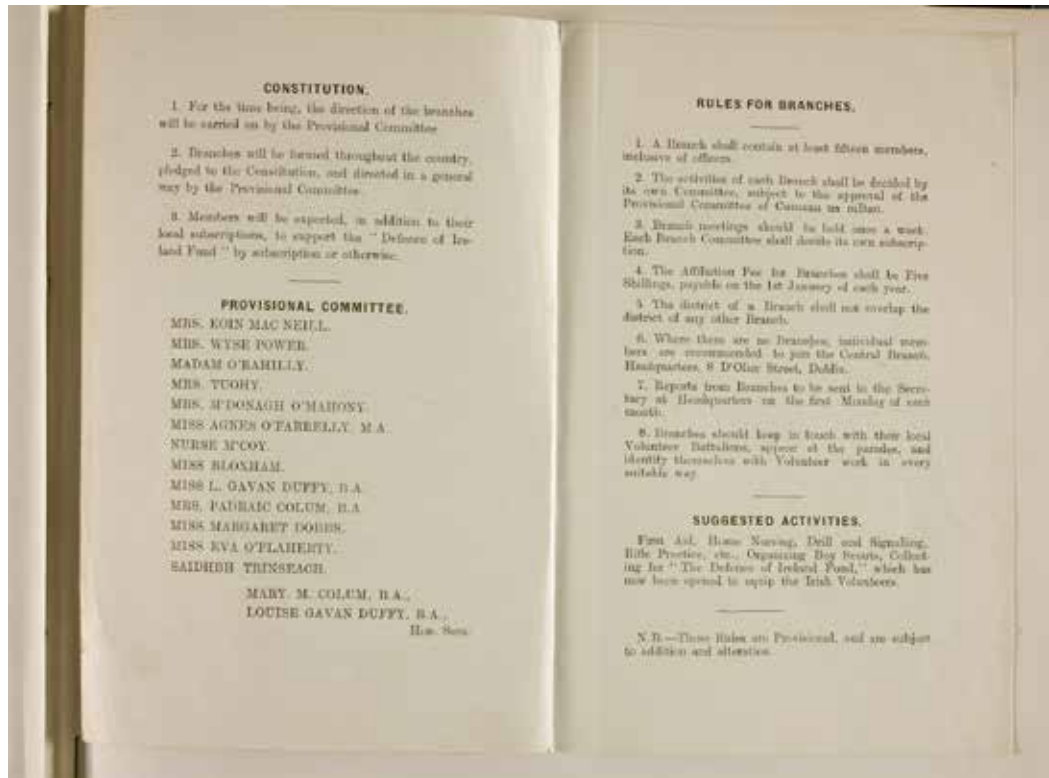
Cumann na mBan was established in April 1914 to complement the Irish Volunteers. Some of its members took part in the 1916 Rising but generally in a non-combatant role.

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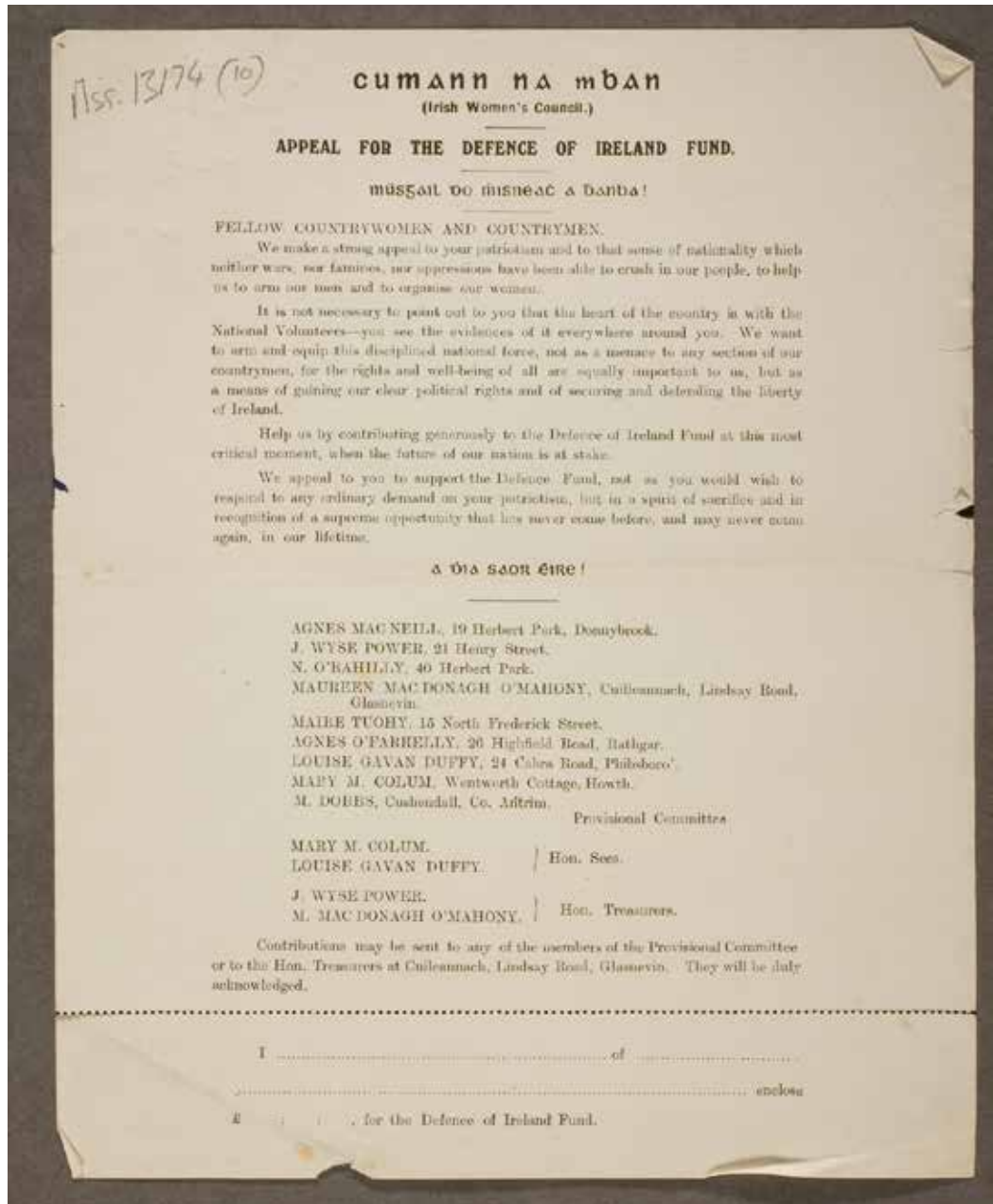
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The Defence of Ireland Fund was intended to finance both the Irish Volunteers and Cumann na mBan, which mainly administered it. (Ms. 13,174(10), Hobson Papers).